

Nutrition and wellness counseling may be coming to your workplace

Margie King | Philadelphia Nutrition Examiner

Steven A. Burd, CEO of Safeway, Inc. which operates Philadelphia area Genuardi's supermarkets, has become a vocal advocate for corporate wellness programs. Writing in the June 12, 2009 issue of The Wall Street Journal, Burd explains how as a self-insured employer, Safeway has held its health care spending steady since 2005 at the same time that the average costs of other employers has risen by 38%. The company accomplished this by focusing on prevention rather than disease treatment.

Burd says Safeway recognized that 70% of its health care costs directly result from behavior, 74% of those costs are attributable to four chronic conditions (cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and obesity) and all four of those conditions are preventable by changing behaviors.

Safeway's plan focuses on smoking, healthy weight, blood pressure and cholesterol, and gives employees premium discounts for maintaining those four markers in a healthy range. The result in just four years is not only a halt to the escalation of health care costs for the company, but also a workforce that has smoking and obesity rates of 70% of the national average.

More and more companies are jumping on the wellness bandwagon, recognizing both the cost savings and the broad array of benefits that come with a healthy workforce, including increased productivity and morale, and lower turnover and absenteeism. On Wednesday, June 17th The Philadelphia Business Journal and Independence Blue Cross sponsored the Working Wellness Expo at the Philadelphia Convention Center to promote and support those efforts.



Steven Burd testifies before Congress on June 11, 2009 (AP Photo/Harry Hamburg)

Local firms set up booths to educate employers and the public on their programs to reduce health care costs through wellness and disease prevention programs. Companies providing wellness support included:

Health Advocate – Ranked one of the best places to work by Philadelphia Magazine, provides wellness coaching to employees, consisting of unlimited online or telephone access to a coach who supports individuals in losing weight, stopping smoking or reaching other health goals. It also provides a risk assessment for 13 leading diseases from cancer to diabetes, and online storage of personal health and medical records.

Wellworks For You – Provides an online educational and motivational site to track employees' progress and learn more about healthy living.

WellNow – Provides telephonic coaching to employees with elevated risk profiles and chronic disease, providing individual support in making behavior changes in nutrition, weight, diabetes and stress management, and smoking cessation. It also provides on-site fitness and nutrition programs, risk assessments and on-site medical screenings.