

Health costs drive bid for fit workers

Communities, companies win when employees lose weight, bad habits

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Special to the Tribune

When it comes to matters of physical fitness, Mayor Rahm Emanuel does practice what he preaches.

Emanuel, who finished this year's Chicago Triathlon and once turned down a scholarship to study with the Joffrey Ballet is, as his aides like to point out, a fitness buff who works out daily.

"It's one the mayor's core beliefs," said Deputy Mayor Mark Angelson. "The guy is up at 5 a.m. every morning in the swimming pool, running and biking."

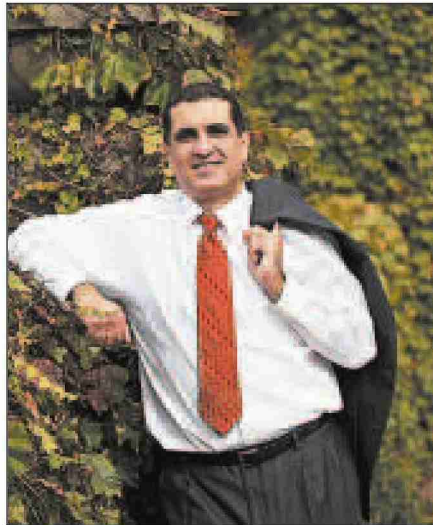
Emanuel hopes to do more than set an example in a city whose inhabitants, let's face it, are known not just for having big shoulders. This month, the mayor rolled out a far-reaching wellness program for public workers that he says will save taxpayers at least \$20 million in the first year.

City workers who participate will receive annual health screenings and quarterly assessments and be able to participate in wellness and weight-loss programs, some of which will be tailored to those with specific chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension. And it's virtually all for free.

But employees who opt out will see their health-care premiums rise by \$50 a

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month, fees that Emanuel's office says will fund the program. City worker groups mostly have signed on, though talks with the police union were ongoing at press time.

While the mayor's office calls his initiative the most



SHAUN SARTIN/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

George Gountanis lost 100 pounds through his employer's health initiative.

comprehensive big-city wellness program in the U.S., it's not merely Emanuel who is pushing the phrase "workplace wellness" to buzzword status in the Chicago area.

More private companies such as the Illinois Bone and Joint Institute and public-sector employers such as the city of Highland Park are signing on to various initiatives that either provide incentives for people to who participate in wellness programs or, as in Chicago's

case, penalize those who don't.

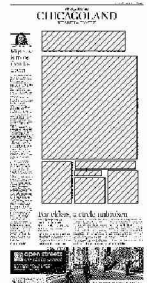
This summer, teams from employers such as Mesirow Financial and the IT firm CDW participated in the Chicago Matchup, a 12-week weight-loss challenge run by HealthyWage, a private company that paid out four- and five-figure cash prizes to the teams that lost the most.

And, through a grant from the Illinois Department of Public Health, the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce is running Live Healthy Chicagoland, another healthy-workplace initiative to which several Chicago-area employers have signed on.

Despite some detractors — the main concern about such initiatives is the protection of workers' private medical records — success stories abound.

Aaron Reesh, who works in sales for CDW, was among five co-workers who altogether lost 14.7 percent of their total body fat to win the Chicago Matchup challenge, netting them \$2,200 each in cash prizes.

Reesh said the chance to win money by losing weight was a no-brainer. Less obvious was that it would lead to



more permanent changes. Each team member continues to work out with a personal trainer, Reesh said, and he now packs his lunch every day to try to resist the pizza and Italian beef that vendors regularly bring in.

George Gountanis, Midwest vice president at Forest Financial Group in Lake Forest, took stock of his health when he turned 38, the age at which his late mother was diagnosed with cancer.

Gountanis was prepared for the bad news when a company wellness screening showed that in addition being overweight at 320 pounds, he had high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Guided by online resources his employer provides as part of its wellness program, Gountanis embarked on a diet-and-exercise regimen. One year later, the 6-foot-2-inch former athlete is down to his college weight of 220 and has lowered his blood pressure and cholesterol.

"Had my employer not been as aggressive, who knows if I would have done it?" Gountanis said.

City of Highland Park building inspector Tim Nearingard wishes he'd taken more seriously his employer's wellness program, which he thought was a scam. He bristled at being told that his blood pressure and cholesterol were high and that the 220 pounds he carried on his 6-foot-3-inch frame classified him as obese.

That was until Aug. 5, when he said he went to the hospital with chest pains and was told he had had a mini-heart attack.

"I could have done this so much better. I could have done the preventive maintenance. I just blew it off"

Nearingard said. "Instead of the kicking and screaming, now I'm actually interested."

The Illinois Bone and Joint Institute started its wellness program last year, offering a 5 percent savings in health care premiums for participants, and the company has similarly seen a 10 percent reduction in cholesterol readings and a significant decrease in high-risk indicators, said Chuck Henry, human resources director. The theory behind a workplace wellness program is that a healthier workforce equals smaller health care costs and less sick time off. Henry said his company expects at least three years to pass before any cost savings appear on paper.

That suggests that it could be a challenge for the city of Chicago to recognize the first-year target its projected savings. In 2009, the city had a total worker health care bill of \$365 million, and nearly half of those claims resulted from eight leading chronic illnesses, Emanuel officials said.

In fact, employers who institute wellness programs shouldn't be surprised to see an initial spike in health care costs, as some workers will learn of new health problems through initial screenings and are often placed on maintenance drugs, said Kenneth Olson, president of the benefits division for the Horton Group, a benefits specialist.

Company officials who monitor the success of wellness programs insist that they see only overall results, not whether an individual employee has lost weight or been diagnosed with having high blood pressure.

While city of Chicago officials also stress that pri-

vacy will be protected, ACLU of Illinois Director Colleen Connell said it's not yet clear how extensive the city's privacy protections will be.

Connell said that employers have a legitimate interest in maintaining healthy workforces but that the consequences of non-compliance with wellness programs need to be spelled out.



SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Cindy Greenhill scores during the company kickball game and cookout for employees of the Horton Group, a benefits specialist.



SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Corporate attorney Kevin Palmer, right, and his teammates watch as the Horton Group's company kickball game.