



► **CASE STUDY**



**Client**

Association of Washington Cities (AWC)  
Employee Benefit Trust, Olympia, WA

**Challenge**

Provide wellness support services as part of healthcare cost containment efforts for 15,000 employees at 250 municipal employers across Washington state.

**Solution**

Develop a structure for local wellness committees that includes extensive training, ongoing support, and awards for cities that achieve a standard of excellence in employee health promotion.

**Results**

AWC's WellCity Awards have helped shift health culture statewide, and WellCity award winners spent an average of \$300 less per year per person in healthcare spending.

**"Building a healthy city begins at the top. Leaders who understand the value of a healthy workforce actively support wellness initiatives."**

– Julie McDowell  
AWC Health Promotion Coordinator

**Association of Washington Cities Supports Local Wellness Champions in 250 Cities**

The Association of Washington Cities (AWC) Employee Benefit Trust offers health benefits to cities and towns across the state of Washington. The Trust offers a fully insured medical program, in addition to a full array of employee benefits, to about 250 cities, each with anywhere from one to 800 employees.

In comparison to a typical employer situation, this would be like having a small, centralized human resources department run wellness and benefits programs for nearly 15,000 employees in 250 separate sites. What makes it even more challenging is that each of those sites is a separate employer with its own policies and leadership.

**One of the first municipal leagues to address wellness**

In the 1980s, the AWC Board of Trustees recognized the importance of wellness as part of healthcare cost containment efforts. But with only a small staff at AWC, a team approach was the only way to succeed. Julie McDowell, AWC's health promotion coordinator, knew she had to sell the idea first to city managers so they would appoint a wellness coordinator within their staff. She told city managers, "We're working with you to help you run your city more efficiently and control your healthcare costs." And cities responded.

McDowell and her team developed guidelines to help cities formalize their structure, including the number of committee members, length of term, and number of representatives from each department, and to formalize wellness coordinator job requirements. "It's important to document the position so it doesn't go away if the coordinator, or a key supporter, leaves the city," McDowell said.

**Wellness coordinators depend on training**

For 99% of city wellness coordinators, wellness is not their regular job. The coordinator can come from any city department, and usually doesn't have a background in worksite health programs. "Our wellness committees include human resource specialists, police officers, firefighters, office clerks, and water meter readers," said McDowell. AWC's training takes health promotion best practices and tailors them to straightforward, practical applications, designed for a diverse city workforce. "We break messages into small, simple instructions, such as 'there are 10 steps to this program,'" said McDowell. Because coordinators may not have experience presenting to city councils, AWC also provides what they need to make an effective case for their recommendations.

The first year, AWC offered a day-long training program on how to start a wellness program. Eleven cities attended the training as early adopters in the wellness movement. Today, AWC offers web-based training as well as two training programs a year that each draws about 200 attendees from across the state. AWC's health promotion staff also provides personalized training and consultations on site at city halls.

Because officials are elected, cities have regular turnover among leadership and ongoing education is required to keep management on top of wellness issues. City managers and elected officials don't usually have time to attend wellness training sessions, so AWC tries to insert employee health messages into their conferences and publications. The focus is on the basics, like why cities should invest in employee health, and what management support for wellness looks like. This could include providing time for coordinators to work on wellness initiatives and support for staff to participate in wellness activities. It also includes understanding how organizations "institutionalize" wellness with everything from passing a wellness resolution, to availability of bike racks and healthy foods in vending machines, to ensuring employees take regular vacations.

### Establish foundation, provide support, and reward success

AWC shows wellness coordinators how to build a foundation that includes written policies and procedures, committee structure, mission statement, objectives, and measurable goals. Wellness committees are encouraged to develop a structure that takes into account the local culture and employee needs and develop programs to match. "Committees can't just jump into fun activities," said McDowell. "Programs fail without a solid foundation."

AWC provides Trust members a core set of health promotion programs including an annual health questionnaire, on-site health screenings, lifestyle coaches, and web-based health management tools. AWC's website offers easily accessible wellness support materials, including an extensive lending library. Local wellness coordinators can also download planning calendars, manuals, reports, do-it-yourself health education kits, and print-ready campaign materials that coordinators can customize and distribute locally as needed.

A key to AWC's success has been offering awards for cities that achieve a standard of excellence in employee health promotion. Cities apply for the WellCity awards, which are given at AWC's annual conference for elected officials and managers. These awards have helped shift health culture statewide. And the benefits are ongoing, as cities reapply each year and don't want to lose the recognition once they've achieved it. AWC also developed wellness certification programs for city employees and is broadening that with a certification program for managers. "Building a healthy city begins at the top. Leaders that understand the value of a healthy workforce actively support wellness initiatives," said McDowell.

What's become clear is that the programs that follow AWC guidelines succeed. In fact, WellCity award winners spent an average of \$300 less per year per person in healthcare spending.

### Steps to success

- > **Start small and grow as momentum builds.** AWC started with training once a year, a manual, grant funding, and some films to check out and has built on that foundation.
- > **Get leadership from the top.** You need management's help to establish the foundation and convey the message through all layers.
- > **Find a champion.** If possible, identify a person locally who has a vested interest in healthcare costs or an interest in health and wellness.
- > **Define the wellness committee structure.** Establish the requirements for each site and create documents on how to develop a wellness mission and goals. Include examples.
- > **Communicate regularly.** AWC sends a quarterly written newsletter to its wellness coordinators and monthly electronic reminders of deadlines, programs, and resources.
- > **Share ideas and recognize success.** Meetings or conference calls are a great way to support networking and sharing of ideas, as well as publicly recognize success.
- > **Combine centralized and local activities.** Send health risk assessment (HRA) information directly to every employee, then involve the local committee to promote it. What the coordinator does locally has a huge impact on participation rates.
- > **Build in evaluation.** Require wellness coordinators to write measurable objectives around what they want to achieve, such as participation and satisfaction rates.
- > **Be open to change.** Continue to evaluate new opportunities, and keep abreast of current industry best practices, such as incentives tied to benefits, and a focus on culture and productivity.