

Experimental Wellness Program Shows 'Good Faith' in Health Outcomes, Costs

A WELLNESS experiment in Seattle's King County aimed at getting employees healthier and reducing medical costs ties what employees pay for health benefits to the effort they make to be healthy. Whether it's aerobics classes, smoking cessation programs, nutrition classes, or departments bonding through group salad days, the King County approach represents a novel and relatively benevolent ripple in what has become a sea of change in how employers are addressing health benefits, according to the *Seattle Times*.

The program skirts between two sharply divided views of today's employee healthcare insurance debate: sharing risks vs. paying what you cost. But what really distinguishes the King County approach is the abiding faith it places in two relative unknowns: the long-term financial return of wellness programs and the human capacity to change behavior in ways that stick.

Run on an honor system, the only requirement is that each employee *try*. "Most everyone needs a push," notes King County Executive Ron Sims. While money talks, it is most often crisis or epiphany that changes long-term behavior. What *is* important for workers trying to get healthier is time and opportunity. To ensure that employees have this opportunity, Sims has devoted considerable staffing and investment (more than \$1 million a year) to health assessments and coaching to make his wellness plan work.

The program has the potential to be a win-win. Employees keep their enviable insurance packages (no premiums and no-cost screenings) and learn to live healthier. King County government hopes to save as much as \$40 million by 2009 or 2010, believing preventive measures could head off many costly conditions. ■

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