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Troup County expands wellness initiative

(April 22, 2009) The addition of exercise equipment made available to employees at the Government Center is the latest in Troup County's wellness/health initiative for its workers.

Open for about a month, the downstairs exercise room is housed in an unfinished courtroom constructed for future use, according to County Manager Mike Dobbs.

"We had extra space, so when we heard Georgia Tech was disposing of exercise equipment and giving governments first option on it, we contacted them," said Dobbs.

The county procured 10 pieces of exercise equipment for \$364, "a tremendous value," he added, noting that one piece purchased new would cost more than \$400. Another piece of equipment was donated by Judge Quillian Baldwin.

Equipment includes a dual axis chest press, stationary bicycles, ab crunch, elliptical cross trainer, stair master, treadmill and more. County employees are invited to use the equipment during breaks, lunch, and after work, according to Human Resources Director Lavelle Barnes. Having equipment onsite helps employees maintain their individual exercise programs, according to Barnes who said providing extra opportunities to exercise falls in line with the county's focus on improving employee health.



County employees take a quick spin on exercise equipment during their lunch break. From left are Diana Evans, purchasing director; Jackie Chambers, maintenance technician; Larry Nommensen, assistant maintenance supervisor; and Gregg Luescher, corrections officer.

In addition, the county offers free Troup County Parks & Recreation membership to all fulltime county employees and their families, providing access to the gym, swimming pool, exercise room and more.

“This helps encourage our employees to exercise more, which will promote better health and productivity for the county,” said Assistant County Manager/Parks & Recreation Director Tod Tentler.

“Troup County’s goal is to have a healthier workforce, which provides more productive employees, therefore reducing and controlling the cost of healthcare,” Barnes said.

Five years strong

Components of the county’s wellness program date back to 2004 when Troup County gained insight from a Milliken and Company-sponsored Area Safety Initiative, according to Barnes who said employees from four county departments took part in the training five years ago, including the Correctional Institute, Fire Department, Sheriff’s Office, and Parks & Rec.

“This program cut our workers compensation incidents in half in four years and continues to produce internal mentors to train other employees,” Barnes said.

In 2007, the county had 100 percent employee participation in health risk assessments that summarized chronic disease risks for each employee.

“Baseline data was crucial to the success of the project,” said University of Georgia Extension Agent Celeste Garrett.

All 446 county employees receiving health benefits at that time were screened by a medical management service to acquire baseline and benchmark data. Of those 446 employees, according to Garrett, 207 had hypertension while 186 were considered pre-hypertensive; there were 37 diabetics, 14 undiagnosed diabetics and 95 pre-diabetics; a total of 179 county employees had elevated cholesterol but only 48 were taking lipid-lowering medication.

“Realizing the severity of the health issue among the employees, intervention needed to be put into place in order to improve health and decrease health costs,” said Garrett. “One missing link that was identified was healthy lifestyle education.”

Employees received mail-outs related to their individual medical findings along with online educational material outlining ways to improve health, according to Barnes. Troup County formed a Wellness Committee and, in 2008, Garrett introduced a wellness program (Walk-a-Weigh) that focused on walking to improve health and spur weight loss. On-site classes were taught as lunch-and-learns for 10 weeks with weekly weigh-ins held at the Extension Office.

“We even had the stairwells at the Government Center painted and carpeted to encourage employees to use the steps as part of their wellness program,” said Barnes.



LaSonya McGruder, a secretary with Troup County Sheriff's Office, takes the stairs for on-the-job exercise.

The 30 employees who completed the class lost 145 pounds and 191 inches, according to Garrett. The Georgia Extension Association of Family and Consumer Science Agents awarded Troup County's program with the Healthy Lifestyle Education Award.

Onsite health clinic opens

The wellness program continues to gain momentum in 2009. In January, mandatory training sessions were held for all employees covered by health plans and, in February, another round of health risk assessments was completed. In March, the Troup County Wellness Clinic opened at the Government Center with a nurse practitioner onsite to tend to employee-patients two days a week, at no cost to county staff.

Emory-Clark Holder Clinic employee Rebecca Humphries serves as the county nurse practitioner. She sees patients Monday mornings and Thursday afternoons, by appointment. The clinic opened on March 2 with a packed schedule and her patient load averages about 10 employees each day she practices at the county clinic.



Nurse Practitioner Rebecca Humphries sees about 20 patients per week at Troup County's new onsite health clinic for employees.

“We do a lot of diabetes management, high cholesterol and high blood pressure work and try to get people to where they need to be without the use of medicine, although I can treat illnesses, give shots, and write prescriptions,” said Humphries. “The health risk assessment was a wakeup call for a lot of people who are now excited about exercising and managing their weight. We’ve had employees come in saying they didn’t know they had high cholesterol and it’s out the roof. This has been a real eye opener for a lot of people.”

The county clinic “is not to replace but to complement care from the primary healthcare physician,” Humphries said. “Now employees don’t have to take time off work and pay doctor’s visit fees. Often you’ll find people put off their healthcare because they can’t get off work. The county wellness program helps them make their healthcare a priority and employees are excited about that.”