

Keeping workers healthy pays off for employers

Muskogee business, school honored for wellness programs

By Keith Purtell

Phoenix Staff Writer

In a written testimonial to her company, Sheryl Baize described what it means to work at a place that has a wellness program.

"I've been smoke free for almost six months now," she said. "Thank you for caring about me. Thank you for sharing the information discussed in the meetings and for access to the smoking cessation prescriptions at a reduced cost. Thank you for giving me extra years of life!"

Baize is payroll manager at ORS Nasco Inc., a Muskogee company that recently won an Oklahoma Certified Healthy Business Certificate of Excellence from the Oklahoma State Department of Health.

Tonya Thompson, benefits and wellness manager at ORS Nasco, said progressive top management and employees are the reason her company was honored for being a healthy environment.

"Our senior management has put \$150,000 into this program," Thompson said. "It's motivation for our employees. They work better, they feel better and they're happier."

The Oklahoma School for the Blind also received an Oklahoma Certified Healthy Business Certificate of Excellence, as did the Lake Region Electric Cooperative in Hulbert.

The program recognizes Oklahoma businesses that provide health and wellness opportunities, and are working to improve the health status of Oklahomans. To be certified, businesses must provide employee health screenings, workplace health and nutrition education, opportunities for physical exercise activities, management support for healthy workplace environments, tobacco use prevention activities, and share wellness activities within their communities.

Thompson said the award is a milestone for their relatively new wellness program.

"This is confirmation that we're on the right track, especially since it's our first year in," she said. "Our employees will carry what they've learned for the rest of their lives whether they work here or don't."

Thompson said that when she was named wellness manager, she decided to lead by example by losing 40 pounds. Reasons for having a wellness program range from job satisfaction to profitability.

"It has to become part of our culture," she said. "Businesses have to understand the need for change, or their health care costs will continue to rise. Studies show that companies that institute programs like this see a 1-to-3 return on investment."

At the Oklahoma School for the Blind, Karen Allen, physical education and health teacher, said their Safe and Healthy Schools Committee, headed by Dean of Students Mike Donahue, has made many improvements.

"We have a walking program, and we issued pedometers for all the staff and the students," she said. "We offer alternative healthy snacks so they're not getting junk food out of a vending machine. We have 'brain breaks' where they can move around and get more oxygen. They feel better, look better and want to do more."

Allen said the school, which has almost 100 students, also prohibits tobacco use on campus.

“There’s a cognitive side where we tell them ‘You’re not always going to have a PE teacher or parent there to tell you about this,’” she said. “Healthy habits are the long-term goal.”

Allen said workshops have taught her that the best way to combat childhood obesity is through a joint effort.

“Community partners like Turning Point and the health department have made a big difference for us,” she said. “And it’s not just us; it’s the teachers, parents, students and community as well.”

Grants from the Kirschner Foundation and the Safe and Healthy Schools program have helped make the campus a better place, Allen said.

There were 92 award winners in the 2007 Oklahoma Certified Healthy Business Program. Twenty-two businesses were selected to receive Certificates of Excellence, 51 Certificates of Merit were awarded, and 19 businesses received Certificate awards. The program was initiated in 2003.

Other winners

Also receiving honors from the Oklahoma Department of Health:

- Muskogee County Emergency Medical Service, Oklahoma Certified Healthy Business certificate.
- Muskogee County Health Department, Oklahoma Certified Healthy Business Certificate of Merit.

To learn more

To learn more about the Oklahoma Certified Healthy Business program and to apply for certification, visit the Oklahoma Turning Point Council Web site at www.okturningpoint.org.

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