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Companies invest in wellness

By Melissa Marchel
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Jay Bee Monroe spends his noon hour swimming laps. While others are having lunch, the geophysicist at Chesapeake Energy is in the pool.

Employees work out in Chesapeake's 40,000-square-foot exercise facility on the company's campus in north-west Oklahoma City.

"It's quite accessible and that's the key," Monroe said. "Normally, I would have never been able to work out at lunch."

As health care costs continue to rise, many businesses find that prevention is the best medicine. Oklahoma companies are investing in wellness programs ranging from on-site gyms to walking programs to incentives to stop smoking.

"Our programs help employees with preventive care and also are used to attract and retain talent," said Martha Burger, treasurer and senior vice president of human resources at Chesapeake. "From our perspective it's a win-win situation."

Another Oklahoma business that invests in health and wellness programs is St. Anthony in Oklahoma City.

"The bottom line is healthier employees are saving the company money," said Jon T. Heath, exercise specialist at St. Anthony North SCORE.

St. Anthony doesn't have an on-site exercise facility, but implemented a walking program, Heath said. Employees bought pedometers and were reimbursed.

Everyone who participated was entered into a drawing to win a cruise, a treadmill or an elliptical machine. After a few thousand steps, St. Anthony human resources assistant Pam DeHorney lost nine pounds and gained a cruise to the Grand Cayman Islands.

"I thought 'wow, I get to lose weight, get fit and go on a cruise,'" DeHorney said.

DeHorney and her co-workers formed teams for the walking challenge.

"It was neat walking through the hallway and seeing other people with their pedometers or seeing people in the cafeteria comparing notes," DeHorney said. "The work environment was much happier now that we were working towards a goal and with a team. It's hard to work out individually."

St. Anthony also is planning a program to help employees stop smoking, Heath said. The building will be smoke-free in November.

Some companies are providing on-site wellness medical exams. Kerr McGee has offered that service since 1992 and won a national award from the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine in 2002.

"A patient leaves not with a prescription for medicine, but with a diet and exercise plan," said Dr. Joe Basinger, assistant medical director at Kerr-McGee. "This is the ideal way to practice medicine."

Kerr-McGee also offers a Weight Watchers at Work program in its Oklahoma City office and has workout centers at many of its locations, including Oklahoma City.

"Health and wellness have always been priorities at Kerr-McGee," said Luke Corbett, chairman and chief executive. "This year, we further enhanced our commitment to employee health by implementing a variety of initiatives. For example, we recently increased preventive coverage in our medical benefits plan from \$100 to \$500, and employees now have access to a 24-hour nurse hotline."

The Turning Point Council has a new initiative to recognize businesses that provide health and wellness plans. A form is available to help certify a business as a Healthy Business.