

Monongalia Health System

WELCOA 

Case Study

Healthy By DESIGN

A progressive West Virginia health system uses a “tough love” strategy to overhaul its benefit plan design. The result? Better data, improved health, and lower healthcare costs.

Monongalia Health System, Inc. (MHS), located in Morgantown, Monongalia County, West Virginia, is a truly special place. In a business environment characterized by mass confusion over the rising cost of healthcare, MHS has quietly gone about the business of implementing a “tough-love” strategy for improving employee health and controlling rising healthcare costs. And they’re beginning to see some payoff for their efforts.

Employing approximately 1,400 people, MHS is the parent company of Monongalia (pronounced, mahn – nahn – gail – eeya) County General Hospital Company and its affiliates—Monongalia Emergency Medical Services, Mon HealthCare, Inc., MonPointe Continuing Care Center, Morgantown Hospice, and the Village at Heritage Point. Additionally, MHS also enjoys close affiliations and has ownership interests

in Mountainview Regional Rehabilitation Hospital, CarePartners (home health) and HealthWorks Rehab and Fitness, all located in Morgantown. Suffice to say, MHS is an active organization.

For example, in the last few years alone the Mon General Cardiology Department has worked with over 5,000 heart patients from West Virginia and over 3,000 patients from surrounding states. In addition, the hospital makes much use of its state-of-the-art birthing center (which includes eight “birthing suites” as well as a private family waiting room), its wound healing center, its center for complimentary medicine, and its sleep disorders laboratory. All this—in addition to the health system’s aggressive community outreach programs—keeps hospital administrators and staff busy working around the clock, caring for the health and well-being of the citizens of the surrounding community.

But even all this action isn’t enough for MHS CEO David Robertson and his committed staff of health and wellness professionals. Not only do they want to excel in caring for the health of citizens in the surrounding area, but they also want to “walk the talk” themselves—ensuring that employees at the health system have the very best programs and services available to them to help them make positive lifestyle choices.

Getting Started: The Early Days at Mon

To accomplish the goal of helping employees lead healthier lives, MHS implemented an employee wellness program in 1992 named *Vital Signs*. In those early days, *Vital Signs* was operated by a volunteer task force and guided by an advisory committee. They spent their days building the program, collecting health data, and developing programs and strategies to reach the workforce with the message of health and wellness.

Much has changed over the past eleven years. Today, *Vital Signs* has grown into its own department with a dedicated staff, ample budget, and plenty of national recognition. Indeed, the health system was recognized by the Wellness Councils of America as a Platinum Well Workplace in 2003—a designation only 13 organizations nationally have achieved.

But this success didn't come easy. Not surprisingly, MHS spent much of the late nineties experiencing the same astronomical healthcare cost increases that plagued other organizations. In fact, it could be argued that the

in only two years.” This monumental increase prompted quick action from MHS execs.

As a leaders in the Morgantown community, health system administrators and wellness professionals wanted to act decisively and with precision, putting into place a system that would educate employees on responsible use of the healthcare system, encourage them to take more responsibility for their own health and well-being, and allow the health system to gather more complete data to use in their health promotion planning process.

Achieving these goals would mean

program, MHS wellness professionals were doing a pretty good job of collecting employee health data and building a program that effectively addressed salient health risks. This data provided the basis for Mon Health System's wellness program interventions, but fell short of being comprehensive and behavior-change oriented.

It was at this time in mid-2002 that MHS administrators, HR, and the Wellness Staff made the decision to link health benefits to the completion of the company HRA. During the 2002 re-enrollment period, any MHS employee seeking health benefits through the organization were required to complete the HRA. Additionally, to engage employees in taking more responsibility for their own health status, and to educate them on healthcare costs and the tools needed to make more prudent decisions when accessing healthcare, each employee was required to attend a self-care training.

Risky Business

Implementing this “tough love” strategy came with its fair share of risk and uncertainty. After all, very few organizations in the United States had taken on such a complete and radical remodeling of their health benefit plan. Says Kelly Stobbe, Director of Community Health & Wellness, “We thought employees would choose not to enroll in our benefits plan, or simply get benefits under their spouse's plan. We even had threats that employees would leave the health system. But none of that happened. Instead, we have slightly increased the number of enrollees in our health plan over last year.”

The reason this new health plan system went over so smoothly? In a word: planning. Leaders at MHS



Mon General Hospital, an affiliate of Monongalia Health System, Inc., has seen a slight decrease in healthcare costs over the past two years.

increases borne by MHS were even more spectacular than average. Says MHS CFO Nicholas Grubbs, “... One of the reasons MHS has become such a significant proponent and leader in the field of employee wellness is in large part due to the significant increase in our healthcare costs—an increase that totaled in excess of 100%

taking some risks—radically rearranging the way healthcare benefits were delivered to employees and dependants.

Making the Link: Employee Wellness Meets Benefit Plan Design

In those early days of the *Vital Signs*

communicated regularly to employees throughout the implementation process, enlightening them on the challenges of rising healthcare costs, and on the importance of taking more responsibility for their own health and well-being.

But that doesn't mean the process went as smoothly as it could have—admittedly, leaders at MHS made a significant blunder when rolling out the program. They didn't communicate to department managers that employees would be notified of the mandatory HRA by way of postal mail, or even when that communication would be sent. As a result, after receiving information on the new plan, some employees came back to work somewhat concerned about the new model, asking questions managers were not prepared to answer.

Says HR Director Sheila Securro, "For about a six-week period, managers had to be prepared to answer some tough questions. I think if we would have had some managerial meetings prior to the rollout, and during that six-week period when questions were flooding in, the process could have been much more efficient."

The Big Rollout

Even still, for such a major health plan overhaul, the process went fairly smoothly. In fact, 21 communicative and educational meetings were conducted by the HR and Wellness departments between June 10th and June 21st 2003. These meetings allowed employees to ask questions about the mandatory HRA as well as learn more about the services offered by MHS that would allow them to help lower costs through responsible use of healthcare services.

In addition to facilitating trust in regard to completing the mandatory



In addition to having an HRA available to them, MHS employees can also take part in free screenings. A \$25 immediate cash incentive is offered.

HRA, the meetings educated and encouraged employees to:

- ✓ Seek preventive care;
- ✓ Use the 24-hour nurse line;
- ✓ Consider disease management programs;
- ✓ Enroll in diabetes education classes;
- ✓ Utilize the results of their HRA for personal life enhancement;
- ✓ Use the Fast Track emergency care service available through MHS;
- ✓ Consider mail order for prescriptions; and
- ✓ Use the EAP before accessing outpatient mental health benefits.

Employees also received a copy of WELCOA's *Self-Care Essentials* self-care book along with an orientation on how to use the book during the re-enrollment meeting.

Even though the new "tough-love" process for receiving health benefits through MHS was unique, and created some initial apprehension, the system has been embraced en masse by employees.

Says Stobbe, "Getting this process in place was really about staying committed, sticking to the game plan, and communicating with employees as to why this was taking place. Any pushback we received from employees faded pretty quickly as they began to realize how this model, though unique, helped everybody."

Better Participation, Better Data

When all was said and done, 996 employees enrolled in the health benefits plan for 2003. This number represents a slight increase (.5%) as compared to the number that enrolled in 2001. Because spouses were also required to complete an HRA if they were covered on the health plan, completed HRAs

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totaled 1,326, a very representative sample on which to draw strategic data for program implementation.

In addition, of the 171 individuals identified through the HRA as being “high-risk,” 126 opted into disease management programs to help them reduce their risks. Considering that research indicates 80% of healthcare costs are driven by 20% of a working population, engaging these 121 “high-risk” individuals in proactive health improvement programs will no doubt pay dividends for MHS in the future.

Based on the information collected from the HRA, and from the medical claims and lost productivity data garnered from WELCOA’s *Target 5* report, MHS keyed in on five core health behaviors to address within the health system. They include:

- 1. Improved Nutrition**
- 2. Enhanced Fitness**
- 3. Weight Management**
- 4. Heart Care**
- 5. Smoking Cessation**

These five areas of focus feature several creative and nationally-recognized programs including MHS’ Blue Plate Program (a program that makes healthy food available in the cafeteria), a newly enhanced “Lifestride”

fitness program, Weight Watchers at Work, Cancer Education and Awareness, Yoga, and marketing many tobacco cessation programs including the YNOTQUIT Tobacco Cessation Quitline sponsored by the Bureau for Public Health.

Better Data, Better Results

While most companies and organizations are experiencing 12-13% increases in healthcare costs, Monongalia has held their costs steady for the past two years.

Additionally, Mon General Hospital, an affiliate of MHS, has actually seen a slight decrease in healthcare costs over the past two years.

Health status has also been improved among the working population at MHS. Participation in the LifeStride exercise

program has consistently increased over the course of the past two years, and in 2003 alone, individual weight loss in MHS’ Weight Watchers at Work program averaged 11.35 pounds per participant. One employee has lost in excess of 100 pounds and uses the program to continue to maintain a healthy weight.

Employees are also actively selecting healthier cafeteria food choices through the aforementioned Blue Plate Special program. In the past six



Bob Wise, Governor of the State of West Virginia, delivers a proclamation to MHS employees recognizing their efforts to build a Platinum Well Workplace.

months alone, 1,134 Blue Plate Specials have been purchased. These Blue Plate Specials, while giving employees a healthy lunch alternative, also contribute back to the Nutritional Services Department budget, an example of the true integration of *Vital Signs* program into the business objectives of MHS as a whole.

Looking to the Future

So what does all of this mean? Not only do the efforts of Monongalia Health System bring recognition and improved health to the organization

itself, but to the community as well. Additionally, MHS has been designated as a Platinum Well Workplace, and the Tri-County Well Region Initiative—with Mon Health System leading the efforts—is well on its way to achieving the first Well Region designation in the U.S. Moreover, Kanawha Valley West Virginia, was recently named a Well City USA by the Wellness Councils of America. Only eight communities nationally have achieved the Well City USA designation.

But, as important as accolades are for personal and organizational accomplishment, perhaps their true value of achievement is that it inspires others to reach their own lofty goals. Already, several organizations have contacted MHS to seek advice on implementing similar health plan models at their own worksites. MHS has gladly obliged in answering all of their questions, knowing that to truly affect rising healthcare costs, sweeping change is necessary—more and more organizations must adopt

Making it happen...

-----Original Message-----
 From: Jeff Waldo
 Sent: Monday, May 20, 2002 1:19 PM
 To: Management Council
 Subject: Health Risk Appraisal

When I was 16, I was told that if I wanted to drive a car, I had to take Drivers Education Training. I didn't like the mandate but I took Drivers Ed as required. Ultimately it made me a safer, more comfortable, confident driver. In the end it also saved insurance dollars, and probably deductibles and rate increases through the resultant good driving record.

This weekend employees of Monongalia Health System received information regarding the Health Risk Appraisal and Self Care Training.

There is a good parallel between my Drivers Education Training experience and the current Health Risk Appraisal and Self Care Training. The Health Risk Appraisal and Self Care Training are a benefit to the employees and the organization, and should be viewed positively.

As with anything new, there is some confusion and questioning going on regarding these programs. The cover letter with the mailed packet clearly addressed the programs. Nonetheless, enclosed is a summary memo that should help you in addressing issues that arise with your employees.

<<HRA Memo 1.doc>>

We will discuss the Health Risk Assessment and Self Care Training in greater detail at Leadership Council on Wednesday.

We need your support in helping the employees to understand and appreciate the importance of this initiative. Thank you in advance for your assistance!

Jeff Waldo, MHS Senior Vice President and General Counsel, shows his support for the HRA program through an email sent to key members of management.

a system that encourages medical self responsibility and discourages the entitlement mentality when it comes to health benefits.

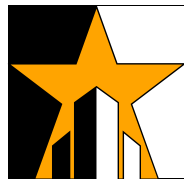
Health promotion professionals at MHS are also looking to the future to better quantify the financial impact of their health promotion efforts. As stated, *Vital Signs* is already making an impact on the organization's bottom line, but, with three to five years of momentum, there's no telling what the outcome could be—both in improved organizational health and reduced costs.

Says Stobbe, "We're pleased to be part of a group of employers that have "paved the way" in implementing this "tough love" strategy. We've contributed to our local business

community and helped answer some important questions for organizations across the US. In the next few years, we're really looking forward to refining our efforts, bolstering education and communication, and increasing participation in some very well-defined programs that address our organization's specific health risks."

Kristan Smith, Wellness Coordinator says, "We know our efforts are paying off, and everyone involved, especially our Well Department Leaders, is excited to see where this road will lead us."

One thing is for sure—the road has already led to better health and better business for MHS, and plenty of other organizations are now setting off on journeys of their own.



ABOUT THE WELLNESS COUNCILS OF AMERICA

The Wellness Councils of America is one of North America's most trusted voices on the topic of worksite wellness. With over a decade of experience, WELCOA is widely recognized and highly regarded for its innovative approach to worksite wellness. Indeed, through its internationally recognized "Well Workplace" awards initiative, WELCOA has helped hundreds of companies transform their corporate cultures and improve the health and well-being of their most valuable asset—their employees.

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