



Creators of some of the state's top wellness programs share success strategies at Crain's Chicago.

# HOW WORKPLACE WELLNESS SAVES LIVES

Chicago-area execs discuss award-winning programs that focus on more than the bottom line

By Jane Adler

**W**hile workplace wellness became popular as a way to cut insurance costs, it's really about saving lives.

That's what one employee at Ottawa Dental Laboratory found out. When the woman started working for Ottawa, she signed up for the wellness program, which provides a checkup with the doctor in the first 90 days. She hadn't bothered getting a checkup for a few years, since she was only 28 and had no signs of any medical problems.

But her next checkup revealed she had early-stage ovarian cancer—something that might not have been caught in time without a corporate wellness program. After surgery and chemotherapy, the woman is back at work and doing fine. "She's a good example of why we do this," says Joanie Bretag, senior vice president of human resources at Ottawa Dental. "It's not about the money."

Bretag recently joined other HR executives at a roundtable discussion of successful workplace wellness programs. The meeting was attended by finalists for the Illinois' Healthiest Employers Awards, which were announced last November. The awards program, which honors companies for outstanding workplace wellness initiatives, was sponsored by Humana, CVS Health and Chicago SHRM. It was produced by Crain's Custom Media.

Other roundtable participants included: William Snyder, market vice president, Illinois Market, Humana; Bryan Robinson, vice president of human resources, The Chicago Cubs; Mary Sullivan, vice president of human resources, Mather LifeWays; and Rebecca Hinrichs, vice president of human resources, Riverside HealthCare System.

What follows is an edited transcript of the discussion, moderated by Rod Reasen II, CEO of Indianapolis-based Healthiest Employers LLC:

## Why did your company develop a wellness program?

*Rebecca Hinrichs, Riverside HealthCare System:* We're in the healthcare business. We operate Riverside Medical Center in Kankakee and serve a four-county area with 45 locations including assisted living, independent and long-term care buildings. We've had an employee wellness program focused on biometric screenings for 10 years. Since we're all about health for the populations we serve, about three years ago we decided to strengthen the wellness program for our 2,700 employees.



*Mary Sullivan, Mather LifeWays:* We're a nonprofit with 500 employees that began as an organization to provide senior living for older adults. About 18 years ago, we expanded our mission to include community initiatives and the Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging, which does research. In 2004, we started a wellness program for employees because wellness is part of our mission and we believe it's the right thing to do. A wellness program was also a way to address the costs we face as an employer who offers health insurance.

*Bryan Robinson, The Chicago Cubs:* Our wellness program is very new. We started it in 2012 when we were adding new associates. We have about 200 employees in Chicago and their average age is in the low 30s. But the baseball season can be a grind. So it was important that we build healthy habits at work since we spend a lot of time at the office. It was also an ethical choice by our owners, the Ricketts family. Employee wellness is really important to them.

*Joanie Bretag, Ottawa Dental Laboratory:* We're a family-owned company that's been in business 78 years. We started our wellness program in 2004 when insurance was becoming more and more expensive. We couldn't charge employees more, but we couldn't pay the rising costs, either. And we didn't want to cut benefits. We've done really cool things with our wellness program and today we have 123 employees. Our annual health insurance costs are about \$320,000, which is less than what we paid for 69 employees when we started the program.

*William Snyder, Humana:* As a sponsor of Illinois' Healthiest Employers Awards, my role is to facilitate the exchange of information about programs that are making a difference. At Humana, we do lunchtime yoga, walking competitions and a host of other programs. It's about providing a safe environment where employees are accepted and encouraged.

**What data do you feel is most valuable for strategic wellness decisions?**

*Sullivan:* We look at data from the major cost areas—claims and prescription drugs. We also conduct biometric screenings and hold

annual wellness fairs. Based on the results, we calculate year-over-year risk reduction and improvement.

*Hinrichs:* We're data driven. We look at biometric data, health-risk assessment data, participation rates, aggregate health data, claims, prescriptions, workers' compensation data and employee opinion surveys. We also harvest stories from employees to inspire others.

*Robinson:* We have goals and objectives, and we track data such as how many employees participate in events, claims cost per associate, the percentage of those with a body mass index (BMI) below a certain target, and how many get annual checkups and screenings. We wanted to have 50 percent of our folks with a BMI under 27.5 percent, and we had 70 percent of them below that level.

*Bretag:* We have fewer than 100 insured lives, so we don't get claims data. We rely on screenings. We prepare graphs of aggregate data to show how we've improved blood pressure readings as a group. Employees also know their own numbers and can see where they stand.

**How do you drive participation?**

*Robinson:* We try to make it fun. Our employees track their progress on a baseball diamond. If they participate in events, like a fun run, they can earn points to get a single, double or triple on their scorecard. The winner gets a trip to spring training. Last year, our overall participation rate was up five percent.

*Hinrichs:* We wanted to reach higher-risk employees since they're the ones who need to make changes. We tied health insurance plan selection to the wellness program. If you don't participate in the wellness program, you get a certain plan. But if you take a health risk assessment and biometric screening, and visit the doctor, you have your choice of any of the plans being offered.

*Bretag:* We use the HumanaVitality program. It rewards employees for making healthier choices, such as exercising, getting preventative screenings and quitting smoking. Employees can earn different

**Moderator Rod Reasen II, CEO of Indianapolis-based Healthiest Employers LLC, left, and William Snyder, market vice president, Illinois Market, Humana**





"Vitality Status" levels—blue, bronze, silver, gold and platinum—to get rewards. Everyone wants that.

### Do you use health monitoring devices?

*Robinson:* Last year, we gave out Fitbits to everyone who had a health screening and participated in the program so they could track their progress. We're doing that again this year, but we've pulled six other Major League Baseball teams into the program.

*Hinrichs:* We're integrating Fitbits into our wellness application, which tracks activity. Employees have the app on their phones.

*Sullivan:* Our Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging just did a study to see if technology motivated employees to engage in healthy behaviors. Clearly, employees said that technology did result in more physical activity. We offered employees free Fitbits if they met a certain threshold of participation in the program.

*Bretag:* We started with the ActiPed, a step counter that's attached to your shoe. We've also used the Fitbit. But it measures any activity, such as moving your arms, so you don't get the same result as you do with the ActiPed. The people with the Fitbit had the most "steps," but the people with the ActiPed had better results. But I recently found a vendor that can integrate the two devices.

*Snyder:* We've found that the technology has to meet the user where they are. Step counters are fine for some employees, but others are running marathons and need something else. You have to engage folks at their own level.

### How do you know if your program is successful?

*Bretag:* Our program was started because of high health insurance costs, which we've cut, but it's not about the money. We use individual success stories and share them with employees. There's a domino effect.

*Sullivan:* We see success when healthy habits become part of every work day. We have tables for standing meetings. We do meetings on treadmills. We had a "Re-think Your Drink" initiative, and we're no longer offering soda at our headquarters. It's not only our culture that's changed, though. We've had healthcare insurance plan renewals that were only up 4.1 percent over a four-year period. That's pretty impactful.



*Joanie Bretag,  
senior vice president of human resources,  
Ottawa Dental.*

*Hinrichs:* We look at participation rates, improved outcomes in cholesterol and blood sugar levels, and reductions in healthcare costs and workers' compensation claims. The changes that have been made in individual lives are really important, too.

### Stress is a topic that comes up in relation to wellness. What impact is stress making on your wellness strategy?

*Hinrichs:* One of the most effective tactics we've found is called HeartMath, a software program that offers evidence-based tools to train employees how to deal with stress. It shows the employee what happens when they're under stress and how to counteract the stress. We also have a free employee assistance program (EAP), and lunch-and-learn programs on stress.

*Robinson:* Each associate fills out a questionnaire on stress as a part of our health and wellness screening. The results are confidential, but if an item is flagged on the report, we encourage them to take the results to a physician. We also have a strong EAP program, and a partnership with the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, which does quarterly day-long programs for us. We want our employees to create good habits, build resilience and learn how to form relationships across the organization.

---

**"We've learned that we need to balance the readiness of employees for change and the eagerness of leaders to move ahead."**

*-Rebecca Hinrichs, vice president of human resources, Riverside HealthCare System*

---

*Sullivan:* Our Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging has done studies on evidence-based resilience training and we've offered those programs to the staff.

*Bretag:* We use Stress Erasers, a biofeedback device that cues you to slow your breathing and heart rate. We also offer free massages.

### Finances are the number one cause of stress after health. Is your company doing anything about financial wellness?

*Sullivan:* We offer a 401(k) and participation is automatic unless the employee opts out. The contributions are invested in a target-date fund based on a retirement date. We have a 94 percent participation rate and an average income contribution of six percent a year. We've also done employee education, and this year we've partnered with a vendor to provide financial information at our wellness fair.

*Robinson:* We have a good 401(k) program with Fidelity, and they send someone to talk to employees about the long-term impact of investing. They work with small groups and offer one-on-one help if someone needs assistance. We also partner with an investment advisor that offers a number of financial resources for employees.

*Hinrichs:* We've held seminars on financial planning, budgeting and savings. We also have a program called "Our Time." We raise money, and any employee who has a hardship can apply for a grant. Last year, we integrated the wellness program and held a treadmill-a-thon fundraiser. Employees were on treadmills 24 hours straight to raise money for co-workers.

*Bretag:* Employees have a 401(k), but we found they weren't managing their funds. They were just letting it happen. So we found a vendor to come in twice a year to conduct planning sessions with employees. Finances are a tricky road, though, especially when an employee has issues. You have to be careful not to cross the lines into their personal business.



**What is the one thing you wish you had known before you started a wellness program?**

*Bretag:* I wish I had known how easy it is, and I wish we had started it sooner.

*Hinrichs:* We've learned that we need to balance the readiness of employees for change and the eagerness of leaders to move ahead. We had to slow down, so we were bringing employees with us instead of dragging them along.

*Sullivan:* We've rolled out programs too fast and have gotten resistance. If I could start over, I would look at the wellness initiative as a shift in culture, something we are moving toward rather than something that's happening tomorrow.

*Snyder:* I agree. I wish I had recognized early on that the focus is on changing the culture. It's impactful to see employees accomplish something together.

**What's your biggest challenge as you move forward with your wellness program?**

*Robinson:* Anybody who is serious about health and wellness knows that the biggest challenge is keeping it fresh. Whatever program you pick, it has to be something you can control. It has to be simple so employees can understand it. And the program has to be something you can track and measure. With our Fitbit challenge, we got employees to join a Facebook group so they could see what their co-workers were doing. Employees who did a health screening got a cool blue pullover with a patch with a "Cubby Bear" logo on it. You have to brainstorm. We like anything we can put in people's hands so they feel ownership in the program.

*Bretag:* I agree. Our biggest challenge is keeping it fresh. I can't spend all my time on wellness, so I want to know about new programs that work.

*Sullivan:* We'd like to personalize and individualize our wellness program more. We need to know what technology is required to make that happen. We want to be able to meet employees where they are, because one program doesn't fit the needs of an entire employee population.

*Hinrichs:* Our biggest challenge is communication, because we have so many locations. We use emails, newsletters, benefits fairs, an online health portal and wellness champions—employees who lead the program.

**What's the next big thing in wellness you're working on?**

*Hinrichs:* We're creating a program to reduce the risk of diabetes or pre-diabetes in our work population. It's a voluntary, individual program. We're in the process of creating metrics and looking at how to leverage our organization to make this happen.

*Bretag:* We're interested in predictive analytics, bringing the focus to the individual.

*Sullivan:* We're looking at integration: how to bring all the data together to make it meaningful.

*Reasen:* We've found that wellness alone isn't enough anymore. We believe that in the future, wellness will be metrics-driven and personalized. Innovative employers are preparing for this next wave of programs. ■



*Rebecca Hinrichs,  
vice president of human resources,  
Riverside HealthCare System*



*Bryan Robinson,  
vice president of human resources,  
The Chicago Cubs*

Photo courtesy of Bryan Robinson



*Mary Sullivan,  
vice president of human resources,  
Mather LifeWays*