Creating a **Culture of Health**
Put Employee Wellness Front and Center

By Deborah Render

Increasingly, hospitals have begun to emphasize the "health" in "health care" – starting with their own employees. Convinced that creating a culture of health has a positive impact on health care costs, absentee-ism, morale, productivity, and overall community health, a growing number of hospitals are energetically embracing strategic initiatives designed to promote wellness by changing employee attitudes and lifestyle behaviors.

Although employee health and wellness programming has simmered on hospitals' back burners for years, a confluence of factors – including health care reform, financial pressures, and a federal commitment to improving public health – has started to significantly heat up activity. Because of their mission and highly visible role within the community, hospitals are ideally positioned to lead the way in building a culture of health that goes well beyond the traditional program-by-program approach.

"When individuals talk about this topic, they generally talk about health, and wellness, and prevention. All of those are obviously relevant and important parts, but a culture of health reflects a more global picture, analogous to how we have a cul-ture of safety in health care. How do we really effectively do all the health management programs to keep ourselves healthy?" says Maulik S. Joshi, DrPH, president of the Health Research & Educational Trust and AHA senior vice president of research. "We're in health care, so to be a role model with our own employees is a critical piece."

Leading by Example

John W. Bluford III, AHA chairman and president/CEO of Truman Medical Centers in Kansas City, Mo., firmly believes there's no substitute for leading by example. "Hospitals need to walk the talk if we're talking about health and prevention. I think it's ironic that it's taken us as an industry so long to get into this when our entire being is about health. We need to look and be the part we're trying to convince other people to be," says Bluford, who chaired the AHA Long-Range Policy Committee that issued the comprehensive *A Call to Action: Creating a Culture of Health* report last year.

As with any culture change, establishing and sustaining a culture of health takes creativity, communication, commitment, and patience.

Individuals share this responsibility to serve as role models with health care institutions, points out ASHHRA Executive Director Stephanie H. Drake. "For example, if a nurse is over-weight, how can he tell cardiac patients that they need to lose weight or watch their cholesterol? How can employees

appropriately help patients take care of themselves if they aren't taking care of their own health?" she says.

Build Momentum, a Step at a Time

A successful culture of health reflects an integrated, strategic approach that encompasses much more than a list of programs or classes. "My definition of a culture of health is one that values health and fitness in the workplace and has policies, processes, incentives, and programs to create a healthy workforce and work environment," Bluford says.

In Drake's view, a culture of health requires an employee base well-educated on healthy lifestyle choices. "They understand what they need to do, have embraced areas they need to improve, and are consciously thinking about it," she says. "It's continual throughout the operation. It's not just the CEO saying, 'We have a wellness plan.' It's adopted by all employees."

As with any culture change, establishing and sustaining a culture of health takes creativity, communication, commitment, and patience. "Hospitals are doing incredible work in this area. But culture takes time," Joshi says, noting many hospitals have found the recommendations in the *Call to Action* report a helpful framework for mapping out goals and tactics.

He suggests a three-tiered approach: 1) conduct a baseline health risk assessment, 2) offer a varied menu of appropriate programs and 3) collect data. "Think about it strategically," Joshi says. "What might you consider now and what in a year or two? There are multiple ways to drive a culture of health, whether it's programs, healthy living and eating, or exercise. And have a plan for data collection that will allow you to see what's working and what's not working."

Drake emphasizes that all hospitals, from large for-profit systems to small rural organizations, should be proactively thinking about creating a culture of health – even with a limited budget. "Every hospital system can do something," she says, pointing out hospitals can start with no-cost options such as bringing in Weight Watchers, educating employees about healthy food choices, or negotiating a membership discount for employees at an area health club. "It's all about looking in your community to see who you can partner with. You just need to think outside the box."

About six years ago, Bluford started focusing on creating a culture of health at Truman. As a first step, the hospital stopped hiring smokers. "That was a major statement in putting a stake in the ground in terms of what kind of environment we wanted to create," he explains. The hospital also conducted a baseline biometric screening, with about 80 percent employee participation. Then it began offering – and continually expanding on – a variety of innovative health-building programs and benefits. These now include a weekly on-campus produce market, an on-site pharmacy, free chronic disease medication prescriptions for employees and their families, stress-releasing activities such as yoga, and an in-house U.S. Bank branch and financial literacy training.

The latest additions include a PTO for Wellness program that enables employees to trade accumulated paid time off hours for reimbursements for wellness-related expenses, and a partnership with the cafeteria food service provider to provide healthier food and price the healthiest options more favorably.

Engagement Starts at the Top

Of course, offering health and wellness programs is one thing – convincing employees to take advantage of them on a regular basis is an altogether different challenge. Drake suggests employees may be more willing to embrace incremental change such as online classes or "anything they can adopt easily without changing their routine." She also emphasizes the critical importance of consistent communication to keep employees focused on the message. "We all get busy," she says. "If they're not seeing the signage in the cafeteria about the incentive to buy the healthier foods, they're going to reach for the hamburger instead of the salad."

Positive incentives, both financial and non-financial, also encourage employee participation and improve outcomes. "Incentives do matter. Positive incentives are a good first step to get people engaged and start the return on investment," Joshi says.

In addition, a highly visible commitment from the C-suite boosts employee engagement. "The CEO may see the need to reduce health care costs and agree to a program, but is he himself participating?" Drake asks. She observes that employees

A Bold Call to Action

As an extension of AHA's roadmap for improving America's health care system, the Long-Range Policy Committee (LRPC) surveyed members in 2010 to identify current and emerging best practices for health and wellness. The committee's comprehensive report, *A Call to Action: Creating a Culture of Health*, urges hospitals to lead the way in creating a culture of health and provides detailed goals, how-to recommendations, and current best practices to support their efforts.

The report features seven recommendations – including action steps and examples – for hospitals seeking to create sustainable wellness models:

- Serve as a role model of health for the community
- Create a culture of healthy living
- Provide a variety of program offerings
- Provide positive and negative incentives
- Track participation and outcomes
- Measure for return-on-investment
- Focus on sustainability

A copy of the full report is available at www.aha.org/advocacy-issues/healthforlife/culture.shtml.

who see executives working out in the fitness center, participating in nutrition classes or Weight Watchers, or ordering healthy food in the cafeteria are more likely to commit to making healthy lifestyle changes themselves.

Bluford agrees that senior executives must demonstrate a personal commitment to improving health if they expect employees to follow suit. He has focused on improving his diet, increasing the amount of sleep he gets, and playing an active role in his community's annual Olympic-style corporate challenge. "I make sure

> **"Every hospital system can do something. It's all about looking in your community to see who you can partner with. You just need to think outside the box."**
>
> — ASHHRA Executive Director Stephanie H. Drake

not only that I'm a participant but that my leadership is participating," he says.

Drake points out that when employees understand how they benefit personally, they are more likely to participate in health and wellness activities.

"It's all about communication," she says. "It's talking with employees not just about reducing health care costs but what it can do for them. Can it make them happier in their daily lives? If you're healthy from a physical standpoint, you're also healthy mentally. You probably have a more positive outlook about coming to work and your life in general. I think many employees have a tendency to think, 'Oh my company just wants to reduce the money they pay for health care, but that's not the case. It's about a healthier lifestyle and a healthier work environment."

Measuring Success

Joshi identifies the number one benefit of a culture of health as improved health of employees and the community, which in turn keeps health care costs in check. "You have to start with your own organization and keep your employees healthy, which increases productivity, quality of life, and personal well-being – all of which have an impact on the larger community and the costs of health care," he says.

Although it's still too early for most hospitals to see true ROI, they're confident it will come. "The bottom line is, if we're going to do anything substantial on bending the cost curve for health care, we've got to do chronic disease management and we have to invest in prevention so people don't get sick in the first place. That's about health, wellness, and fitness," Bluford says.

"It's a challenge to have enough of a focus to invest in a program on the front end when ROI is somewhat elusive, and at the very best it's two to three years out. You don't get immediate payback that's quantifiable," he admits. "But if you have continuity of effort and continue it over the long haul, there's clearly payback. In our case, 50 percent of our employees live in the community. So if we improve the health of employees and their families, then we are in effect making an impact on the community. I'm just very optimistic. I think we're going to make a difference." ∎