

The health risks associated with obesity are well documented. Hypertension and heart disease, diabetes, cancer and even arthritis can be caused or affected by obesity. Every day, healthcare workers treat patients who are suffering the repercussions of obese living – yet ironically these same healthcare workers suffer from a high rate of obesity themselves.

Last May, leadership at Blue Ridge HealthCare decided to aggressively address the issue of obesity in the workplace. A wellness program called WELLWORx was established to motivate employees toward more healthy living. It was offered to employees at Blue Ridge HealthCare affiliates, including Grace Hospital, Valdese Hospital, Grace Heights, College Pines and others.

Employee wellness programs are no new proposition. Many area corporations and businesses offer incentives and educational support to employees who want to live healthier. But WELLWORx utilized all the resources, knowledge, technology and momentum of a well-organized healthcare entity to create a highly effective program.

WELLWORx offered support groups (including Weight Watchers), free memberships to Phifer Wellness Center, advanced screening for cholesterol and diabetes, body mass indexing and other components to help employees understand where they stood with their health – and how to improve it.

The program also offered cash incentives to employees who met the stated goals of the program – goals that



WELLWORx Coordinator Charlotte Eidson (left) with employee Regina Bumgarner who lost over 35 pounds.

specified inches and pounds to be lost. If the goals were not met, the money was not distributed. Now, six months after the program's inception, the results are quite impressive.

By the end of Phase I of WELLWORx in August, the 319 participants had lost over 1,300 pounds, or on average a little over 4 pounds per person. This total included participants who may not have lost weight – although about 75% did meet their stated wellness goals. The trend has continued since August, with hundreds of additional pounds being lost.



Blue Ridge HealthCare employee Beverly Canipe has her blood pressure checked at a WELLWORx Screening.

WELLWORx coordinator Charlotte Eidson said, “People took the commitment seriously. We wanted employees to realize that they have to take care of themselves. There are so many priorities in our lives, we often overlook the things we have to do to keep healthy.”

“Some people only met the requirements while others greatly exceeded them,” said Eidson. “And it wasn’t only weight that changed. Employees who were identified for other risk factors showed improvement.”

Over 48 people were originally referred to a pump-and-ratio group for blood pressure risk factors. Eidson reported that 40 people’s progress has been such that they could leave the blood pressure referral group.

“The people who went for diabetes education also had good results,” Eidson continued. “That support group not only worked with the participant, but also with their family—because the family support system is what’s really going to help the individual make improvements.”

Eidson is quick to point out that weight management has really made a great difference for most participants.

“In America today obesity is the leading reason we have many other problems,” she said. “So if we can encourage weight reduction, many of these problems will decline. Even a little weight loss can lead to better health.”

Now in the middle of Phase II, Eidson said 33 employees are new participants in the program. “We are really pretty much where we want to be at this time,” she said.

VP of Human Resources, Phil Satey said, “I’ve heard only

WELLWORx - Continued

good things about the Wellworx Program. People are investing in themselves and taking advantage of the health resources we have right here for them. It's an excellent program that's causing a buzz. Carolinas HealthCare System in Charlotte has even shown interest in what we're doing up here."

Satey believes the WELLWORx program is just another key element that makes Blue Ridge HealthCare one of the premier employers in Western North Carolina. "Few employers offer as nice a wellness facility as Phifer, he said. "And we have highly energized people who are really pushing us to take advantage of one of the best wellness programs in the region."

As with most employer-sponsored wellness programs, Blue Ridge HealthCare hopes that by improving employee health, ballooning health insurance costs will be minimized. It's not yet known exactly how much WELLWORx will impact insurance claims, but early indications seem promising.

Eidson says the strength of WELLWORx is NOT in support groups, free wellness center memberships or monetary incentives. "This program puts the responsibility on the participant, which makes it more powerful for the individual. Ultimately you have only yourself to thank for your success or lack of success."

She continued, "I honor the employees who were ready to make a serious commitment to improving their health, even those who didn't meet the requirements. They're still moving in the right direction."