



More employers starting wellness plans

By [John Schmid](#) of the *Journal Sentinel*

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Amid the din of the nation's health policy debate, one trend seems clear: More employers are adopting corporate programs to assess healthiness, promote wellness and ultimately reduce the cost of medical insurance.

"They do it because it's working," Michael Bolger, president of the Medical College of Wisconsin, said in an interview Monday. Bolger, who spearheaded a three-year effort to win Milwaukee's designation as a "Well City USA," said the increase has become self-evident as insurance costs have continued to rise around the country.

Milwaukee won the designation last month because a growing number of employers such as Northwestern Mutual, Joy Global Inc. and PyraMax Bank have adopted wellness policies. The Wellness Council of America, a nonprofit organization, awarded the designation after the city was able to show that 30% of its working population is employed at organizations that offer wellness programs.

Wellness policies differ from company to company. But nearly all include a health assessment that quizzes employees on lifestyle habits, exercise, nutrition, stress, smoking and alcohol. Without assessments, most Americans would not bother to think about their risk profile, said David Hunnicutt, president of the Wellness Council of America.

"The vast majority of working people in this country have no idea what their health status is," Hunnicutt said in an interview.

Hunnicutt arrived in Milwaukee Monday ahead of a speech he delivers to business leaders Tuesday morning at the Pfister Hotel.

Other features include tracking of biometrics, such as blood pressure, weight, heart rate and cholesterol, he said, adding that employers are required to keep the results confidential. Most corporations also have health coaching or activities as well as incentives to exercise or quit smoking, he said.

Wellness programs have existed for 25 years but only recently began to gain traction as employers struggle with rising health insurance costs. The United States stands alone amid advanced industrialized nations as a country where medical insurance is provided by employers, not government systems.

But at \$2.6 trillion annually, U.S. health costs lead the world as a percentage of national economic output, Hunnicutt said. At 16% of gross domestic product, "we spent two times as much as any other industrialized nation in the world," he said.

Wellness programs, however, are meant to reduce risk and change lifestyle habits, which in turn reduce the number of insurance claims and slow the rise in annual premium increases. "For every dollar that companies invest in workplace wellness programs, they'll see on average about a \$3 return on investment in the form of lower health care costs, reduced absenteeism, increased productivity and lower disability," Hunnicutt said.

The wellness designation helps polish the city's image, said Janet McMahon, executive director of Well City Milwaukee, a coalition led by the Metropolitan Area Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Milwaukee Committee and the City of Milwaukee.

"Milwaukee is not a rusty beer and brats city any longer," McMahon said.

Only six cities have a Well City USA designation. Asked why so few cities participate in a program that has existed for 25 years, Hunnicutt said the idea was ahead of its time:

"To be right too soon is to be wrong," he said in an interview.

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