



# Employers as Financial Sustainability Partners

## **Background:**

The bottom line of a business can be deeply affected by its employees' health and productivity, which makes employers potential partners in establishing financial sustainability for self-management programs. Large businesses—particularly those that are self-insured—and businesses that provide ample health benefits are the most promising choices for financial sustainability partnerships, because these employers will have a stake in reducing health care costs and will likely have more resources for addressing health-related issues among employees.

## **Why Employers Would Want to Support Living Well:**

Chronic diseases are one of the leading causes of missed days of work and lack of productivity at work. As an increasing number of employees have chronic conditions, helping them manage these conditions becomes vital. Employees who have the knowledge and skills to make healthy choices will be more successful in managing their chronic health conditions. They will be less likely to go to the hospital or emergency room, and may be less likely to be readmitted after leaving the hospital.

Employers care about the health and productivity of their employees. Living Well can help to reduce health care costs, decrease absenteeism, lower the number of worker's compensation claims, and retain healthy employees.

## **How Employers Can Be a Funding Resource:**

Some local programs already work with area employers that provide in-kind assistance in the form of marketing programs to employees, donating space or healthy snacks for attendees, or by providing financial sponsorship for workshops. That provides an excellent entrée for a conversation about how they can provide more sustainable, impactful support.

If an employer offers insurance benefits and is convinced of the importance of self-management programs to improve employee health and productivity or decrease health insurance premiums, they may be convinced to advocate for adding programs as standard covered benefits through their insurance and employee assistance program contracts. See the model benefits package in Appendix B for details.

If an employer does not offer insurance benefits, Living Well programs could provide an inexpensive means to support employees with chronic conditions in staying healthy and reducing their need for expensive emergency and hospital services.

**Oregon State Chamber of Commerce  
Searchable Business Directory:**  
<http://oregonorcoc.weblinkconnect.com/search>



### Example:

- The Deschutes County Employee Benefit Advisory Council approved the Living Well program as a benefit for employees and dependents in 2007. Employees register for community-based workshops and pay a \$10 registration fee. If they attend four of the six sessions, the Living Well regional coordinator sends a verification of attendance letter to the benefits coordinator. The employee is then reimbursed for the \$10 fee through the Self Insurance Benefit Fund, and Living Well Central Oregon receives \$50.

### Who to Talk to and How to Get in the Door:

Approach business leaders who are already involved in local business health coalitions, who sit on health-related boards, or whose companies support local health events. Local chapters of Rotary, Lions or Kiwanis clubs, chambers of commerce, Small Business Association groups, and meetings of health or business coalitions are good places to make connections.<sup>1</sup> Be mindful that time is money (start with a 15-minute appointment if necessary), ask lots of questions (e.g., current employee health benefits, types of claims, employee demographics) to determine the potential value of Living Well to the employer. Let employers tell you what they need.

When preparing to approach employers, research the company and look for potential areas of connection. For example, an employer of sedentary office workers may see the benefit Living Well offers in improving physical activity or helping employees to eat more healthfully, while a company whose employees exert themselves physically all day at work could have a stronger need for enhancing employees' stress management and relaxation skills.

Larger employers may have a wellness coordinator who could be a helpful ally. If the company offers health benefits, they may have conducted employee health risk assessments to pinpoint employees' health issues. If this type of workplace-specific information is not available, specific information about the local population such as county-specific data on the number of Oregonians with chronic diseases in the state publication *Keeping Oregonians Healthy*<sup>2</sup>, the Living Well county level data reports<sup>3</sup> and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's County Health Rankings<sup>4</sup> may be helpful substitutes.

*Business leaders are important champions because of their influence, credibility, connections and resources... They can help [by] establishing a model worksite program at their company [and] talking to other business leaders about the benefits... [such as] reducing company health care costs, improving employee health and productivity, and supporting healthy communities.*

—CDC Heart Healthy and Stroke Free  
Worksites Toolkit Guide

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Successful Business Strategies to Prevent Heart Disease and Stroke: Heart Healthy and Stroke Free Worksites Toolkit Guide*. [http://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/pubs/docs/toolkit\\_guide.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/pubs/docs/toolkit_guide.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://public.health.oregon.gov/DiseasesConditions/ChronicDisease/Documents/healthor.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://public.health.oregon.gov/DiseasesConditions/ChronicDisease/LivingWell/Pages/pubs.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/>



### Issue Brief: Living Well and Employers

Chronic disease is putting our health care system under enormous pressure, and purchasers are bearing much of the cost. In Oregon, diseases such as cancer, heart disease, lung disease, diabetes and arthritis claim the lives of more than 19,000 people and result in \$1.4 billion in hospitalization costs each year.<sup>5</sup> Chronic diseases also account for more than 2.5 billion missed work days or “work cutback” days per year in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Although employees with chronic conditions may know *what* they need to do to manage their disease, they often don’t know *how*. It is crucial to help Oregonians with existing chronic conditions live successfully and help them use the health care system as efficiently as possible.

#### **The Living Well with Chronic Conditions Program**

Oregonians are learning how to manage their chronic health conditions by participating in the **Living Well with Chronic Conditions** program and its Spanish language/cultural version, *Tomando Control de su Salud*. Living Well is delivered in a series of six weekly 2-1/2 hour workshops led by trained community members, many of whom have chronic conditions themselves.

Living Well is a proven program developed at Stanford University. The workshops teach people with chronic diseases to make healthy lifestyle choices and lessen the impact of their symptoms and of the disease itself. Participants have less pain and more energy. They are more able to live the lives they want, and gain the ability and confidence to care for their condition. Participants learn how to properly use medications, communicate effectively with health care providers, and evaluate new treatments.

Living Well improves quality of life by reducing fatigue and increasing physical activity, emotional and physical well-being and ability to function in social settings. After completing Living Well workshops, patients are healthier and better equipped to avoid unnecessary hospital readmissions.

#### **Living Well and Employers**

Living Well can help employers build a healthier, more successful, and more productive workforce. As the number of Oregonians living with chronic conditions continues to grow, Living Well can help valuable employees stay healthy and stay at work.

The average cost for someone to attend the six-week program is \$375. Compare this to the cost of missed workdays and increased health care costs due to avoidable emergency room visits and hospitalizations.

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<sup>5</sup>Oregon Department of Human Services. *Keeping Oregonians Healthy*, 2007.

<http://public.health.oregon.gov/DiseasesConditions/ChronicDisease/Documents/healthor.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>Kessler, RC et al. The Effects of Chronic Medical Conditions on Work Loss and Work Cutback. *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine*. 43(3):218-225, March 2001.

## Appendix C (3)



Employers can help make it possible for individuals with chronic conditions to live successfully, for communities to embrace health and disease prevention, and to reduce the demand on our health care system.

- If you offer insurance benefits:
  - Make Living Well a standard part of your employee benefit program and encourage employees to use it.
  - Ask your health plan and employee assistance programs to include Living Well workshops as a covered benefit.
- Publicize Living Well programs to your employees, and consider providing incentives for participation.
- Host Living Well workshops at your worksite.
- Have administrative policies that support employees who want to attend Living Well workshops, such as flex time or sick leave.
- Encourage Living Well for family members of employees, and support employees in attending with family members.
- Support employees who want to be trained as Living Well leaders, through flexible work arrangements or other arrangements support.



### Talking Points for Employers Who Offer Insurance

*These talking points are for use by Living Well programs when approaching funders. They are not to be handed out. Instead, leave behind the “issue brief” handout. Please remember, when you use these talking points, be sure to listen as much as you talk. The goal is to understand your prospect’s perception of the program, and what they would need to support it.*

- Acknowledgment:
  - Thank them for any current or prior engagement in or support/funding for the Living Well program, and for the opportunity to talk with them now.
- The problem:
  - Chronic diseases are a major cause of missed work days. For example, every day in America, 40,000 people miss school or work due to asthma.<sup>7</sup> Chronic diseases account for more 2.5 billion missed work days or “work cutback” days per year in the U.S.<sup>8</sup>
  - The 27 percent of Americans with multiple chronic conditions account for two-thirds of health care spending.<sup>9</sup>
  - Every year, the toll of chronic disease in Oregon is more than 19,000 lives and \$16 billion in health care costs.<sup>10</sup>
- The solution:
  - Worksite wellness programs and policies contain health care costs, decrease absenteeism, improve employee morale, cut the number and cost of workers’ compensation claims, and help attract and retain healthy employees, according to dozens of studies.
  - Providing coverage for Living Well for members is a cost-effective complement to employer wellness programs and disease management.
  - Employees who have the knowledge and skills to make healthy choices will be more successful in managing their chronic health conditions. They will be less likely miss work and may be less likely to file worker’s compensation claims.
- Living Well:
  - Living Well with Chronic Conditions does just that. It is a six-week workshop that provides tools for living a healthy life with chronic health conditions, including diabetes, arthritis, asthma and heart disease.
  - Living Well workshops teach people with chronic diseases to take the best care possible and, in many cases, lessen the impact of their symptoms or of the disease

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<sup>7</sup>Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America: <http://www.aafa.org/display.cfm?id=9&sub=42>

<sup>8</sup>Kessler, RC et al. The Effects of Chronic Medical Conditions on Work Loss and Work Cutback. *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine*. 43(3):218-225, March 2001.

<sup>9</sup>US Department of Health and Human Services. Multiple Chronic Conditions—A Strategic Framework, 2010. [http://www.hhs.gov/ash/initiatives/mcc/mcc\\_framework.pdf](http://www.hhs.gov/ash/initiatives/mcc/mcc_framework.pdf)

<sup>10</sup>Oregon Department of Human Services. *Keeping Oregonians Healthy*, 2007. <http://public.health.oregon.gov/DiseasesConditions/ChronicDisease/Documents/healthor.pdf>



itself. They learn to deal with physical and emotional issues, gain tips on properly using medications and communicating with health care providers, and form relationships that create a support system across the community.

- The impact:
  - An Oregon State University study of 4,000 program participants in Oregon found that they avoided more than 500 emergency department visits, more than 500 hospitalizations and nearly 3,000 hospital days, yielding an estimated health care savings of more than \$6.5 million.
  - After completing Living Well workshops, patients are healthier and less likely to be readmitted to hospitals, ultimately reducing health care and disability costs and helping them stay at work.
  - Because Living Well improves participants' self-confidence for managing their health problems, it helps shift a portion of the health care burden off health care purchasers and insurers while empowering and activating participants.
- Why it matters to **employers**:
  - Living Well can help employers build a healthier, more successful and more productive workforce.
  - The average cost for someone to attend the six-week program is \$375. Compare this to thousands of dollars for a hospital stay. Lower medical costs can translate to lower insurance premiums.
- What employers can do:
  - If you offer insurance benefits:
    - Make Living Well a standard part of your employee benefit program and encourage employees to use it.
    - Ask your health plan and employee assistance programs to include Living Well workshops as a covered benefit.
  - Publicize Living Well programs to your employees, and consider providing incentives for participation.
  - Host Living Well workshops at your worksite.
  - Have administrative policies that support employees who want to attend Living Well workshops, such as flex time or sick leave.
  - Encourage Living Well for family members of employees, and support employees in attending with family members.
  - Support employees who want to be trained as Living Well leaders, through flexible work arrangements or other arrangements support.