



## Governor enlists state workers to 'be fit'

*By Marion Davis, Staff Writer*

They say politics is a sport, but in Rhode Island government, that's not good enough anymore. Gov. Donald L. Carcieri wants state employees to eat well, manage stress, and walk, run, do yoga – whatever it takes to get in shape.

To help them, on Wednesday he launched “Get Fit, Rhode Island,” an effort to “reduce the barriers that workers face in leading active and healthy lifestyles” by providing exercise programs, health resources and even healthy shopping (in the form of a farmers’ market) right at work.

The program, extending all across state government, builds on work done over the last year by individual departments with the **Worksite Wellness Council of Rhode Island.**

The Department of Labor & Training, for example, now offers yoga classes twice a week after work, and some workers there, along with colleagues at the Department of Human Services, are establishing walking clubs that go out during lunch breaks and after work.

Several state governments have similar programs: Healthy Ohioans, Virginia’s CommonHealth, Tennessee’s Working Well, Vermont’s State Employees Wellness Program. Some have been around for over a decade; their features range from programs similar to those Rhode Island is starting, to fitness center discounts, to – in Vermont – a network of nurses who provide health screenings and create customized wellness plans for employees.

The goal of all, as with private-sector programs, is to reduce health care costs by keeping employees in better shape and encourage them to take responsibility for their own well-being. Workplace wellness efforts have also been shown to boost morale and productivity.

“It’s about each individual as well as the state as a group,” said First Lady Sue Carcieri, who is co-chairing Get Fit, Rhode Island. A biology teacher with a master’s degree in health education, Mrs. Carcieri said getting to lead this initiative is “almost like a dream come true. And with her recent heart problems, she said, “now I could be the poster child for someone who needs healthy habits.”

The program will be run by a new state wellness director, Anne Marie Connolly, a 20-year veteran of exercise physiology and wellness education, in conjunction with the Department of Health. Connolly will be based at the University of Rhode Island, which is providing expert support from its exercise physiology, nutrition, behavior modification, nursing and health psychology faculty. Connolly will also work closely with “wellness champions” at each state department and agency.

To start employees on their path to better health, employees are being asked to participate in a confidential, anonymous, 50-question online health assessment through UnitedHealthcare’s Web site that will provide instant feedback about their health habits and offer suggestions about how to improve their lifestyles. Employees who aren’t United subscribers will get a paper survey through the Department of Health.

The state will get an aggregate report based on the assessments to help gauge its employees’ overall health risks and needs and guide the development additional wellness programming for employees. The state will not receive specific information about any employee.

The launch of Get Fit, Rhode Island helps move the state closer to Carcieri’s goal of becoming the first “well state” in the nation, a distinction from the **Wellness Councils of America** that would require 20 percent of the working population to be employed at sites that have been certified as “well workplaces.” More than 200 Rhode Island employers are actively working toward their certification, and 28 have received it, including Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, the state Department of Health, Newport Hospital and Toray Plastics.

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