



*Rhode Island has set its sights on becoming the nation's first Well State.*

# WELL STATE RHODE ISLAND

## WELL CITY GOES STATEWIDE

BY BO ABRESCH

**E**ven though Rhode Island is perhaps best known for being the smallest state in the Union, business leaders there have big ideas about improving statewide health and well-being. Recently, business leaders and health professionals in Rhode Island set their sights on taking WELCOA's Well City USA initiative to the next level. They have begun the process of becoming the first Well State in the nation.

In doing so, "Little Rhody" would become the first—and only—to attain such a designation.

### A STATELY PURPOSE

A long time believer and active participant in the Healthy People movement, the Well State idea seemed a natural fit. After all, when Rhode Island became interested in the Well State project early in 1999, it had already established health programs within the state's school systems, and the workplace setting seemed to be the next logical step for health promotion.

Says Bill Waters, Deputy Director of the Rhode Island Department of Health, "When working to improve health and well-being statewide, it's imperative that you go where the people are. If you're talking about children, that means going to the schools, and we have an active school health program. But we needed to reach adults, too, and that meant going to worksites. That's where adults spend most of their time. It became obvious to us that the worksite was a vital channel that needed to be

developed if we were going to be successful in improving the overall health of Rhode Island residents."

### THE NUMBERS GAME

The Worksite Wellness Council of Rhode Island (WWCRI), the division of the Rhode Island Department of Health responsible for recruiting businesses into the Well State project, began the work of securing business participation right away. Getting area businesses excited about participation in the Well State project by building health promotion programs into their workplaces was a relatively easy sell—most business leaders were watching their health care costs soar each and every year.

Currently Rhode Island has nearly 200 businesses actively involved in achieving Well State status. These businesses represent approximately 86,000 employees, making up about 18 percent of Rhode Island's total working population. Impressive to say the least. These numbers rival the statistics posted by some major metropolitan areas participating in Well City USA projects, and place Rhode Island very close to its goal of reaching 20 percent of the state's working population.

And while some may think that because of its size, Rhode Island's road to a Well State designation will be an easy one, they should stop to consider that its strength as a small, cohesive community may also be its own unique challenge.

Says Waters, "One of our challenges in the Well State Rhode Island project is that we're a state of small businesses. That fact makes this undertaking extremely challenging because, in order to do this, business buy-in must be pieced together slowly. There's not one large business to put us over the top. But it's a good challenge, too. I think it will enhance the solidarity and longevity of wellness in the state, and make the enterprise more stable in the long run."

### NETTING RESULTS

Even though the Well State effort in Rhode Island has been under way for a relatively short time, results are already becoming evident. For example, as a result of the Worksite Wellness Council of Rhode Island's tobacco education programs, 6,747 Rhode Island employees have reduced their exposure to environmental tobacco smoke. In addition, out of the 85 organizations participating in the tobacco control initiative, 51 percent are now offering worksite smoking cessation programs as opposed to the eight percent that offered programs in 2000—an increase of 43 percent.

For its outstanding work in the area of tobacco control, the Worksite Wellness Council of Rhode Island has received the American Cancer Society's Silver Anniversary Honor Roll Award. It was also recently awarded the 2002 Outstanding Programming Award from the Rhode Island Public Health Association for its innovative tobacco control programs.

Because of the success seen in its worksite-centered tobacco cessation programs, the Worksite Wellness Council of Rhode



Island is currently seeking funding for additional worksite wellness programs that will focus on nutrition, physical activity, and weight management. Funding looks to be forthcoming, and with it, these nutrition, physical activity, and weight management programs would be implemented into Rhode Island's working cultures in much the same way smoking cessation was—theoretically prompting similar results.

### WAVE OF THE FUTURE

Admittedly, the Well State Rhode Island project is just getting started. Although the state has accomplished much to this point, there is still much to be done before Rhode Island can really begin to concentrate on how the project will play out over the next decade. It's safe to say, however, that business and health leaders in the area will continue to recruit other organizations into the cadre of healthy companies even after they reach their noble goal, and that their innovative programming techniques will continue to evolve.

As Rhode Island remains committed to meeting Healthy People priorities by integrating health and wellness into the business community at large, it will be increasingly important for health and wellness leaders in other areas of the country to pay close attention. Rhode Island's Well State effort could be that important.

Considering this reality, the most important observation about Rhode Island's role in the future of statewide health improvement initiatives might just be this: The future is now. ★



*From left to right: Blue Cross Blue Shield of Rhode Island CEO Ronald Battista; Rhode Island Dept. of Health Director Dr. Patricia Nolan; Newport Hospital CEO Arther Sampson; and Beacon Mutual Insurance Company CEO Joe Solomon show off their Well Workplace Awards.*