

Worksite Wellness: in bloom!

Throughout the state, and within HEALTH itself, a robust practice of good health behaviors in the workplace is increasingly in evidence.

Corporate America is tuning in to the many benefits of keeping its work force healthy. HEALTH promotes Worksite Wellness in two ways. First, as a member of the Worksite Wellness Councils of America (WELCOA), it is the founding member of the Worksite Wellness Council of Rhode Island (WWCRI). Second, it maintains its own Worksite Wellness initiatives.

Worksite Wellness Council of Rhode Island

In 1982, a group of employees in Omaha joined together to form the nation's first Wellness Council. Its mission was, and is, to enhance the health and well-being of employees, to improve productivity, reduce absenteeism, and contain escalating health care costs. The Omaha Council's success spurred cost-conscious employers in other communities to form their own Wellness Councils under the WELCOA umbrella. Through HEALTH's initiative, in 1999 Rhode Island joined the Wellness Councils of America under the WWCRI banner.



Speaker Dr. Louis Sullivan, President of the Morehouse School of Medicine, greets guests at the WWCRI annual breakfast January 18. Head table (l to r): Peter Fornal, WWCRI President; Dr. Patricia Nolan, Director of HEALTH; William McGowan, Business Manager, International Brotherhood Board of Electricians; Charles Fogarty, Lieutenant Governor; Todd Cipriani, WWCRI Membership Committee Chair

WELCOA maintains a nationwide network of locally affiliated Wellness Councils serving thousands of corporate member companies and their employees. It offers direct membership opportunities for organizations not served geographically by a local affiliate. WELCOA promotes its credo that "Corporate wellness makes a bottom-line impact." Today, more than 81 per cent of America's businesses with 50 or more employees have some form of health promotion program. The most popular activities include exercise, stop-smoking classes, back care programs, and stress management. WELCOA's combined workforce totals over 2 million Americans. Membership is open to any company anywhere, including Canada and abroad. At a turbulent time for health care in the United States, WELCOA demonstrates that worksite wellness is health care reform that **works**.

HEALTH has awarded the WWCRI a \$50,000 grant to promote smoking cessation and collect data on environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) in the work place. The Council is working with the American Lung Association, RI Chapter, to spread the word about the perils of secondhand smoke and to help in the elimination of smoking in the work place. Through this affiliation, the Lung Association will refer to the Council names of companies and individuals seeking information, strategies, and techniques in worksite tobacco control.

In April, the Council participated in the Providence Chamber of Commerce Business Expo 2000 at the RI Convention Center with an information booth staffed by volunteers answering questions and distributing brochures on ETS in the work place. The Council also presented a seminar on ETS in the work place.

Making Rhode Island the first "Well State"

Rhode Island aims to become the nation's first "Well State" by December 31, 2001. To accomplish this, key companies plan to complete a WELCOA program called the "Well Workplace University." These companies include health care systems, educational institutions and municipal organizations who collectively employ 20% of the state's workforce. If successful, they will meet the requirements of WELCOA's Bronze, Silver or Gold Well Workplace Awards. The Wellness University and the WELCOA Awards set specific standards companies and organizations must meet. They must demonstrate evidence that their employees benefit in body, mind and spirit from progressive, health-conducive work environments.

The Well State initiative is a project under development. The partnership between HEALTH and WWCRI provides a strong foundation for future success.

HEALTH Worksite Wellness Initiatives

HEALTH wants to become a model for how organizations in Rhode Island, both public and private, implement Worksite Wellness. Toward this end, HEALTH Director Dr. Patricia Nolan re-structured HEALTH Worksite Wellness initiatives in 1999. She organized a combined Worksite Health Committee, chaired by HEALTH staffers Edna S. Poulin, Chief, Worksite Wellness, and Michelle Santos, Information Specialist. Committee members include professional staff from all divisions. The Committee set an aggressive agenda to make HEALTH a model not only for the state, but also for the nation. Some activities:



William Kizer, WELCOA Board member, Dr. David Hunnicut, WELCOA President, and Peter Fornal, WWCRI President



- **Facility survey of physical structures and buildings.** *HEALTH* commits to making its buildings and workspace as safe as possible. This survey includes all aspects of its physical facilities, including corridors and walkways, stairways, work stations, offices, meeting rooms, restrooms, ventilation, temperature control, air quality, parking facilities, and more.

- **Analysis of injury records.** *This comprehensive review of employee injury records will help identify high risk areas and suggest corrective measures.*



WWCRI Vice President Mark Converse chats with RI business community members about HEALTH's grant, which will create an alliance with the American Lung Association to mount a full-scale assault on environmental tobacco smoke in the work place.

- **Wellness Check 2000** is a tool to identify health risks resulting from employees' behavior and lifestyle choices. *HEALTH* makes this technology accessible to employers throughout Rhode Island as well as its own employees.

- **Other channels for employee health and wellness information and feedback.** *These include a Health and Safety Committee, the Director's quarterly meetings with all employees, "brown bag" lunches on special health topics, an Employee Handbook, a suggestion box, and the Director's lunchtime small group meetings to hear the concerns of employees.*

Readers may contact Edna S. Poulin, Chief, Worksite Wellness, at 222-5112 for further information. *The Public's Health* will provide updates of *HEALTH's* Worksite Wellness activities in future issues.

Health Watch : West Nile Virus

Last August a mosquito-borne virus (new to the US) sickened 60 people in New York City. Seven elderly people died. West Nile Virus (WNV), common in parts of the Middle East, western Asia and Africa, now threatens to spread to other states along the eastern seaboard. Unlike similar diseases transmitted by mosquitoes that live in swamps and rural areas, WNV favors the common, urban "house mosquito." As a result, any part of the state, urban, suburban or rural could be affected.

Fortunately, the spread of WNV can be prevented by taking a few common-sense steps before mosquito season arrives. Together with the Department of Environmental Management (DEM), the Department of Health (HEALTH) developed an action plan for Rhode Island. Here's what's involved:

Mosquito Control: Mosquitoes breed in small amounts of standing water. DEM purchased and distributed larvicide to municipalities for use in storm sewer "catch basins"—ideal mosquito breeding areas. By reducing the population of adult mosquitoes, cities and towns will help reduce the risk of human infection.

Monitoring: Early detection is key to managing the threat. *HEALTH* will monitor health care providers to identify any human cases. DEM will use its network of volunteers, veterinarians and Animal Control Officers to watch the wild bird population for signs of illness. Mosquitoes carry the virus from infected birds to humans. DEM will also step up its' mosquito trapping activities. The URI Center for Vector-Borne Diseases is prepared to test captured mosquitoes for WNV and other infections.

Education: People can take common sense steps to protect themselves from mosquito bites. Clearing the yard and rain gutters of debris that allows standing water to collect eliminates places for mosquitoes to breed. Repairing screens on doors and windows keeps mosquitoes outside where they belong. Finally, using insect repellent (no more than 30% DEET, the active ingredient) and wearing long tops and pants, especially at dusk and dawn, prevents mosquito bites. *HEALTH* and DEM will distribute information on personal protection from mosquito bites in several languages.

Implementing this plan should reduce exposure to WNV-infected mosquitoes and allow everyone in Rhode Island to enjoy a safe and healthy summer. For more information, consult the *HEALTH* website: www.health.state.ri.us.

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