Partnering with the Minnesota labor community to reduce tobacco use among blue-collar workers and their families

This Issue

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Overview

In previous issues, we've provided information about the impact of tobacco use on health and business, the importance of comprehensive coverage of effective tobacco cessation services, and ways to promote a cessation benefit. In this issue, we focus on what it means to instill a culture of wellness, its significance in supporting workers' health, and roles funds can play. We provide information about the use of incentives and strategies to encourage utilization of a benefit. We also report on ways in which Jim Hynes and the TCPT have implemented wellness strategies. A separate fact sheet addresses the importance of conducting an evaluation of a wellness initiative.

Tobacco cessation in the context of wellness

In this issue, we explore how Taft-Hartley funds can bolster the efforts of their stakeholder groups—trustees, administrators, advisors, unions, and employers—to instill a culture of health and wellness among fund participants. What does it mean to instill a culture of health and wellness and is there a role for funds to play? What steps can funds take to help transition and transform workplace environments to support workers' health and wellness?

Instilling a culture of wellness is about exercising leadership to create an environment that supports healthy lifestyle choices. Health behaviors and diseases rarely occur in isolation. Although tobacco use is still the leading preventable cause of disease and death among U.S. adults—and its use among blue-collar and hospitality workers is particularly pronounced—it is just one of several behaviors that contribute to poor health. When fund advisors and trustees, as well as union leaders and employers, herald health and wellness as priorities, this creates momentum for fund participants to embrace healthy living goals, such as quitting tobacco use, increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables, reducing salt and sugar intake, and incorporating exercise into daily routines.

Taft-Hartley funds can help to instill a culture of wellness by providing a comprehensive tobacco cessation benefit, promoting the benefit, and ensuring that participants understand and can access the benefit without difficulty; setting goals and considering whether potential benefit modifications advance these goals; and providing trustees with conference and webinar opportunities to learn how to advance wellness initiatives. By playing an active role, funds will be investing in evidence-based strategies that will improve the personal health of workers and families and the overall health status of workers within their respective trades and industries—and this, in turn, will drive down health care costs.
Tips on using incentives

There is insufficient evidence to support the effectiveness of using incentives as a stand-alone strategy to encourage participation in a wellness initiative or to change health behaviors. However, evidence supports using incentives to encourage positive health behaviors when used as part of a comprehensive intervention that includes education, counseling, and FDA-approved medication treatment. Below are general tips on using incentives:

- Use incentives as rewards, not punishment.
- Ensure that incentives are equally accessible to all participants in a wellness initiative.
- Tie incentives closely to the behaviors being addressed. For example, a fund that is trying to encourage enrollment in a tobacco cessation treatment program could provide a one-month supply of Nicorette gum to all members who enroll in the program.
- Be clear about the purpose of incentives. For example, a fund that is trying to decrease tobacco use could provide an incentive when participants achieve certain steps or milestones, such as participating in a stop-smoking program, using a tobacco cessation medication, or successfully quitting.
- Use tangible and/or intangible incentives. Tangible benefits include union and employer paraphernalia, gift certificates, subscription to health magazines, weekend getaways, monetary contribution to a flex/health savings account, and samples of an over-the-counter tobacco cessation medication. Intangible benefits include recognition in a fund, union or workplace newsletter or commendations from leadership.
Many consider the Twin City Pipe Trades Service Association (TCPT) a leader in health and wellness among Taft-Hartley funds in Minnesota. At the helm of TCPT is Executive Administrator, Jim Hynes. A strong and tireless advocate of worksite wellness, Hynes spearheaded the founding of the Labor Care Fair, which has grown from a single-fund event to a much larger, annual multi-fund event in just three years’ time. The event attracted over 5,000 Taft-Hartley participants this past April.

How does the TCPT approach the issue of wellness? To encourage wellness, Hynes operates on the premise that small steps lead to big changes. “Members need to know that they don’t have to run marathons. Small changes are okay,” says Hynes, who believes such an approach may be more palatable to members. Funds can help their members take small steps toward changing their behaviors by giving them multiple opportunities to engage in wellness initiatives. Hynes encourages the fund’s members to think about one positive change they can make in their lives to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

For Hynes, promoting wellness is not a one-time effort. “You need a variety of ways to reach your members in order to make a change,” Hynes says. “The Labor Care Fair is great, but it’s one thing. You continually need to try and do new things that will make a change in that culture.” Hynes advocates using various wellness initiatives and communication strategies, in person, in print, on websites—which Hynes refers to as “touch-points”—in order to reach fund participants.

Hynes considers member input a critical component of designing wellness initiatives. “You can’t be all things to people. So where do you start?” Hynes says. Over the past several years, TCPT has solicited workers’ and spouses’ input, using focus groups and surveys to gain a better understanding of participants’ preferences and concerns. The information gathered through this feedback has allowed TCPT to map out areas of interest and concern, and tailor programs to meet their participants’ needs and reach them effectively.

While cost is frequently a barrier to implementing wellness initiatives, Hynes has demonstrated success in securing sponsorships and accessing wellness programs created by other organizations. Hynes has also been successful in getting the fund’s members—most of whom are lifetime members—to think about the costs of health in terms of “real dollars,” thereby building members’ support for investing in initiatives that will eventually save the fund money.

Hynes is energized about the future of worksite wellness. His goals include growing the Labor Care Fair and designing a wellness initiative around healthy eating. He even has his sights set on building and operating health and wellness clinics to serve members of the building trades, providing them with access to health coaches.

Hats off to the forward-thinking, ever-active Jim Hynes!
Opportunities for action: Strategies to invoke participation

Fund trustees, administrators, and advisors assess members’ needs and strategically plan benefits and programs to meet those needs. The following ideas are examples of steps a fund can take to motivate participants to use tobacco cessation benefits, or another benefit, once in place.

Market the benefit

By marketing a benefit, a fund will maximize participation. Sending a letter co-signed by labor and management trustees to fund members to introduce the benefit can help motivate workers to use the benefit.

Use a comprehensive approach

A fund can expand the reach of a benefit by implementing benefit components and activities that meet the needs of tobacco users at all stages of quitting (pre-contemplation, contemplation, determination, action, maintenance, and relapse). Offering a comprehensive slate of evidence-based quit methods helps expand the reach of the benefit.

Build flexibility into the initiative

By initiating a variety of activities and features that allow fund members to participate at different levels of intensity, commitment, and cost, a fund can reduce or eliminate barriers to participation.

Provide ongoing programming

Ongoing programming includes linking events and activities that are part of a tobacco cessation initiative to other events that occur during the year. A fund can also provide regular awareness and reinforcement messages through multiple communication portals, such as toolbox meetings, safety and health presentations, newsletters, and health fairs.

Engage and demonstrate support among key stakeholders

Trustees, administrators and advisors can cultivate support among their respective stakeholder groups and demonstrate a shared commitment to defined goals, e.g., setting a shared goal to reduce the prevalence of tobacco use among fund members and their families by a certain percentage by a set date, and involving all stakeholders in working toward the achievement of that goal.

Draw upon the resources and expertise of local organizations

Organizations such as the American Cancer Society and the American Lung Association offer cost-effective educational information and activities that funds can use strategically to reach members.

Provide incentives for participation

A fund can consider using incentives to encourage participation as part of a comprehensive wellness intervention that includes education, counseling, and FDA-approved medications. (See Tips on using incentives, p. 2.)
References


Evaluating a fund’s wellness initiative

Including evaluation components in the design of a wellness initiative is necessary to determine what aspects of the initiative have been successful and to identify areas for improvement. Evaluating the initiative will help guide a fund’s future efforts, facilitate decision-making, and provide guidance for other funds who may be interested in undertaking a similar initiative.

An evaluation includes the systematic collection, analysis, and reporting of information about an initiative. The evaluation findings help trustees and administrators understand the relative strengths and weaknesses of the initiative and how it can be improved to maximize intended outcomes. Although it can be difficult to allocate financial resources for this purpose, the knowledge gained makes investing in evaluation money well spent.

Types of Evaluation

Three types of evaluation are important for accurately assessing a wellness initiative—process, intermediate, and outcome evaluations.

Process evaluation. A process evaluation provides insights about the relative merits of the initiative—what did and didn’t work, who was reached, and what areas might have benefitted from improvement. A process evaluation can occur during or after implementing an initiative. Conducting a process evaluation during implementation may identify opportunities for mid-course adjustments. Examples of questions that probe process evaluation are:

- Was the initiative implemented as planned?
- How did the initiative achieve its objectives?
  - What strategies were used to reduce the number of tobacco users?
  - What activities were conducted?
    - How many fund members were screened for tobacco use?
    - What materials did fund members receive about tobacco cessation services? For example, a fund can keep a record of messages related to prevention or environmental change, such as preventive messages that discourage tobacco use or encourage participation in the fund’s initiative
- Which stakeholders were involved?
- What were the experiences of individuals who participated in the initiative?

Intermediate evaluation. An intermediate evaluation examines the short-term outcomes of an initiative. The short-term outcomes are connected to long-term outcomes. Examples of questions that probe intermediate outcomes include:

- What immediate effects did the initiative have?
  - Were there changes in the number of claims that indicate whether fund participants used the tobacco cessation services?
  - How many fund participants made a quit attempt?
- Can the fund clearly attribute changes in the rate of participation in the initiative to the campaign?
- Did the fund’s initiative directly affect participants’ behavior or knowledge?
  - For example, a fund can keep a record of participants’ knowledge about tobacco cessation medications before before and after an initiative.
Outcome evaluation. Also known as long-term evaluation, this kind of evaluation examines the long-term effects of a fund’s initiative on its participants’ health status and whether planned objectives were met. Examples of questions that examine outcomes include:

- What changes in prevalence of tobacco use occurred as a result of the initiative?
- What health effects were associated with the initiative? For example, insurance claims can be used to measure health effects relative to the following questions:
  - Was there a change in the number of tobacco-related deaths? Tobacco-related diseases?
  - Tobacco-related disabilities? Number of sick days used?

A Sample Initiative to Reduce the Prevalence of Tobacco Use Within a Fund

In conjunction with setting a goal to reduce the prevalence of tobacco use among fund participants, a fund can design an initiative to implement and promote a comprehensive tobacco cessation benefit, including the following evaluation components:

Program objective: Reduce the prevalence of tobacco use among fund participants.

Intervention strategies:

1. Implement and promote coverage of comprehensive tobacco cessation services;
2. Create educational messages about the value and availability of tobacco cessation benefit; and
3. Launch a campaign, setting a firm goal to reduce the prevalence of tobacco users by a specified percentage or number by a certain date, e.g., by December 2012, the fund will reduce the prevalence of tobacco users by 20%.

Evaluation question: Will the provision of a comprehensive tobacco cessation benefit, coupled with a campaign to reduce the percentage of tobacco users by a target date, increase the number of fund members who attempt to quit and succeed in quitting tobacco use?

Process measures: List events that occurred as part of the initiative, stakeholders involved, and strategies used.

Short-term outcomes: An increased use of tobacco cessation services by fund participants.

Long-term outcomes: Reduction in prevalence of tobacco use among fund participants, decrease in tobacco-related deaths, disease, and disability.

References


To learn more about smoking cessation, visit www.workshifts.org.