

Local News

Get healthy or get out, boss told employees

Howard Weyers got angry at smoking and overeating

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BENTON HARBOR - Howard Weyers believes that the bottom line for health care costs depends on what's happening with the waist lines of employees.

Or the lungs, or any other organ that could fail due to misuse or neglect and cost an employer money.

And he believes those employers should be encouraging workers to live healthier lifestyles and aggressively monitoring what they do inside - and outside - of the workplace.

"If we do nothing about personal health, we will do nothing with cost," Weyers, a health benefit consultant based near Lansing, told about 40 people Friday at his seminar at Michigan Works on reducing health care costs. "It all starts with personal health: for you, your spouse and your children."

As the owner of Weyco Inc., a health care consulting company, Weyers started policies that put his employees on notice that they - and eventually their spouses - would have to shape up or ship out.

In 2003 he started with a strict no-tobacco stance that gave employees 15 months to quit. The company paid for smoking cessation classes, counseling and nicotine substitutes for those who wanted to kick the habit. After that time, the employees were subject to random tests to determine if they were complying with the company rules. Failing or refusing to take the test resulted in a penalty of \$50. The fine could be waived for employees who agreed to undergo a quit-smoking program.

Tobacco's the easiest thing to attack first "because Michigan smokers have no rights" and can be legally dismissed for that reason, Weyers said. He went after tobacco because "I didn't want to have to pay for the results."

All but four of his 210 employees went along with the testing, and two of those later took Weyers to court.

His position on tobacco use earned him what he called "unnecessary publicity" with interviews on "60 Minutes," "20/20" and major newspapers and TV talk shows.

Journalists questioned whether Weyers was taking a "Big Brother" approach toward the health of his employees.

His philosophy, he explained to his audience, is "I pay, I say. If you pay, you say."

Even those who are not on the company health plan create added expenses when they or a family member have what he calls "a health episode," either through absenteeism or decreased productivity.

He later extended the no-tobacco policy and the testing to spouses.

"If you don't like it, go down the street," Weyers responded to potential resistance from employees.

Weyco was sold to Meritain Health in 2008, which has rolled back some of Weyers' policies, including random testing for tobacco use.

Going after fat

After tobacco, the biggest health problem is body fat - too much or too little, Weyers said.

The company helped pay for health club memberships and to support such activities as biking and hiking - anything that could improve the well-being of workers. Again, the company kept tabs on the results.

Weyers is a trim man of 76 who said he eats healthy and works out five or six times a week. He was a runner for 40 years before knee problems slowed him down.

He said the third hurdle to staying healthy is not following a doctor's orders. He had an employee who was diabetic but neglected to take the steps to lessen the effects and had frequent hospital visits. That person was shown the door.

If you're not going to listen to your doctor, "I'm not going to pay for you running in and out of the emergency room," Weyers said.

All of the efforts paid off, claimed Weyers, showing that his company's average cost for health care premiums per employee stayed virtually unchanged over a seven-year period.

He has found that most employers are afraid to take such aggressive steps to improve employee health, and many employees resist the incentives available.

This puzzles him, because most company presidents would immediately correct problems with the quality of their products or services, but shy away from confronting skyrocketing health care costs that he says are the result of poor health habits.

Even athletic teams train their athletes "to perform mentally and physically at the highest level," said Weyers, himself a former high school and college coach. "Why not do this with employees?"

He's not looking at federal health care reform to solve the problem, because "it does not talk about fixing the cause."

And he believes that the educational system has "failed miserably" to teach about personal health, and even doctors are not taught how to talk about the subject.

Health savings accounts

He advocates the use of health savings accounts for employees. A worker contributes to a fund much like a 401K, drawing money out for health costs as needed and drawing interest on the balance. The money left over at retirement can be drawn out tax-free if spent for health costs, Weyers said.

This encourages employees to reduce their own costs, he said. "You put money in and work like hell not to have a medical episode."

Weyers firmly believes in preventing illness and not letting it strike. "Employers are not serious about cutting health care costs if they're not paying for preventative care," he said.

Weyco paid for physical, vision and dental screenings and made them mandatory, with penalties for workers who neglected these check-ups.

Nothing is going to change if people keep doing the same thing over and over, he said.

"I passionately believe that if we don't fix the cause, we ain't gonna fix the cost," Weyers said. "No way."

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