

Businesses As Partners to Improve Community Health

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American businesses are uniquely positioned to exercise leadership in their communities and to promote better health for workers and their families.¹

The National Business Coalition on Health (NBCH) certainly concurs with this statement from the report with recommendations from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Commission to Build a Healthier America.¹ In fact, all of the potential “Action Steps for Employers and Businesses” outlined in the report—food and nutrition, physical activity, healthy behaviors and places, and early childhood development—are relevant and used in varying ways by some of the business sector now. Expanding the use of these and other similar techniques by employers can greatly add to the improvement of community health; business has demonstrated its creativity and ability to address health improvement.

The progression of employer engagement in health and health care mirrors the evolution of business-led coalitions on health in various regions across the country. Once employers began to face increasing health premiums in the 1980s and had already addressed the administrative costs of their health plans, they realized that additional savings had to come from reduced benefit claims. This realization came at the same time that the first small-area variation data were being made available through the work of Jack Wennberg at Dartmouth (www.dartmouthatlas.org) and the beginning of the focus on quality improvement by Don Berwick and others (www.ihl.org). Employers began to understand that more health care did not necessarily directly produce better health or better health outcomes. To support changes in healthcare delivery, employers recognized the need to coalesce not only for knowledge and education about the issues but also to influence action. Some employers also began to pursue more aggressively health promotion, preventive services, and wellness as a way to help improve health—and productivity in the workplace. This has led more recently to an expanded effort to create a workplace culture of health that helps to promote health

and productivity, with all of the indirect factors including both safe workplaces and safety in healthcare settings. Now some employers are looking at the health of the community, as this influences the positive programs and policies they may be using within their company. The progression of actions includes incentives for both employees and practitioners to promote the use of evidence-based benefits, also known as “value-based benefit design.”

Figure 1 summarizes the progression from Stage 1 in which the employer addresses direct costs of health benefits, to Stage 2 in which the employer is beginning to move to a workplace culture of health, to Stage 3 in which the employer has established a culture of health and embraces a culture of health in the community. NBCH member coalitions are actively engaged with their employer members in the evolution to Stage 3, with the coalition and its member employers engaged in a broad array of policy and program initiatives aligned with developing a healthier America community by community.

The NCBH and other business-focused organizations are helping to move employers along this continuum and to support collective actions through business-led health coalitions in their local communities. Most recently, the NBCH has initiated a Community Health Partnership (CHP) seed-grant program to help promote stakeholder collaboration—especially business and public health—to align common goals that will help to improve the health of the community population. These partnerships are generating actions such as the following:

- building relationships with public health officials for common goals for health improvement;
- identifying areas for improvement and measuring progress collaboratively, based on community health assessments and available metrics for both health status and health care cost and quality;
- establishing healthier environments with tobacco-free campus policies, support for walking trails at worksites, office design features, and information about community resources and programs for employees and their families;
- supporting policies such as fluoridation of water;

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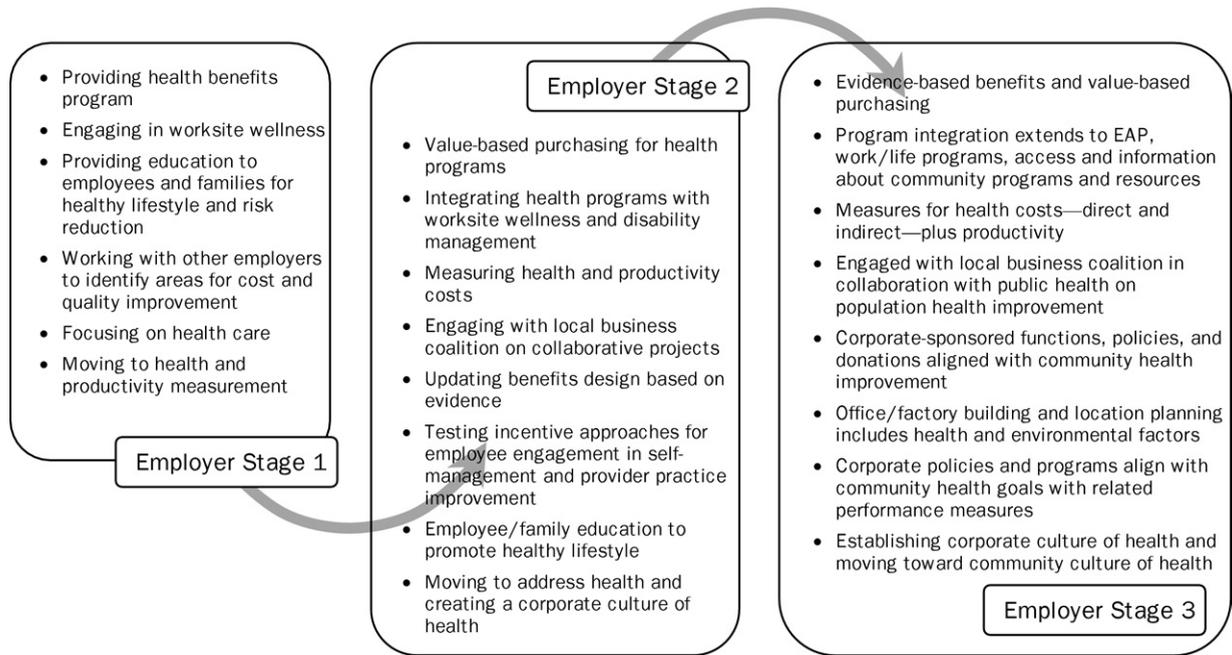


Figure 1. Employer stages of transition to workplace culture of health and partner for community culture of health EAP, employee assistance program

- reaching out to local schools to promote programs such as Open Airways to address asthma management for children;
- creating new programs of health education and expanded support such as coaching by pharmacists or diabetes health educators, with incentives for participants using value-based benefit designs.

This seed-grant program, and NBCH's promotion of metrics for population health, performance measures for health plans, and support of value-based approaches to health and health care, champion the progression of actions by employers as framed by the RWJF commission. By striking out in these new directions, employers can better achieve their organizational goals, along with building a healthier, more economically robust America.

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