



West Virginia Builds a Sustainable Infrastructure for Work@Health

With nearly three quarters of adults working 40 or more hours per week, workplaces have a tremendous impact on the health and well-being of the American public. From management style to healthcare benefits to supports such as water fountains and nutritious food options, the work environment influences the physical and mental health of employees in numerous ways.

In today's market of low unemployment, well-being at work has become even more important to job seekers. Employers are increasingly aware that to recruit and retain a productive workforce, they must take employee health into account. For employers that are inexperienced in shaping health-focused work cultures, the task can seem daunting and expensive. At the same time, the cost of doing nothing is steep, with the Integrated Benefits Institute finding that chronic diseases and injuries in the workforce cost U.S. employers \$575 billion dollars in lost productivity each year.¹ How then do employers foster work environments that promote employee health, well-being, and productivity – and improve the bottom line?

Work@Health Training Supports Best Practices in Workplace Wellness

Launched in 2015, [Work@Health](#) is an evidence-based CDC initiative to promote workplace wellness by training employers to develop and implement health promotion strategies. Since 2017, the [National Association of Chronic Disease Directors \(NACDD\)](#) has partnered with the CDC to deliver Work@Health training nationwide with the goal of

reducing chronic disease and injury risk, supporting mental health, and improving workplace productivity.

The Work@Health Employer Core Training Program consists of eight learning modules on topics ranging from the impact of employee health on business outcomes to implementing science-based workplace health programs and policies. Participating employers complete the [CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard](#) and gain access to an extensive resource library and peer learning opportunities to assist them in applying worksite health best practices.

Since its inception, Work@Health has trained over 900 employers across the country. Training is led by professional instructors who undergo a rigorous certification process to deliver the Work@Health curriculum. The CDC and NACDD provide trainers with ongoing technical support and professional development opportunities. Participation in Work@Health deepens trainers' knowledge of worksite wellness interventions while improving their leadership and training delivery skills. Additionally, Work@Health helps trainers build valuable partnerships and advance their professional goals.

Work@Health Key Roles



Employers participate in training that builds the knowledge and practical skills required to implement employee wellness programs.

Train-the-Trainer Program certifies health promotion and public health professionals to provide comprehensive training to employers in their communities.

Master Trainers complete additional requirements and are able to train other Master Trainers, Train-the-Trainers, and employers.





Work@Health Adds Structure and Sustainability to Active Southern West Virginia’s Workplace Wellness Program

In 2015, Active Southern West Virginia (Active SWV) opened its doors in Beckley, West Virginia as a nonprofit dedicated to improving community health. Located in rural Appalachia, a region that struggles with health issues including heart disease, diabetes, short life expectancy, substance use, and obesity, Active SWV was founded with the goal of promoting physical activity through accessible community programming and resources. Recognizing that a host of economic and social barriers prevent West Virginians from maintaining physically active lifestyles, Active SWV designed its programming around accessibility, flexibility, and sustainability, providing an ecosystem of volunteer-led physical activity programs for residents.

With West Virginia leading the nation for the prevalence of poor physical and mental health,² Active SWV saw a clear need to include the workplace as a site of community health. With many people spending about one third of their day at work, often in environments with no health-supporting infrastructure or policies, bringing wellness programming into local workplaces was an opportunity to make a significant impact on the health of West Virginians.

In 2017, when Active SWV’s workplace wellness program was still in its infancy, the West Virginia Department of Health (WVDH) approached them with an idea: bolster their curriculum and expand their reach by incorporating turn-key, evidence-based Work@Health training. It was a win-win proposition, with the WVDH achieving its aim to build a sustainable Work@Health infrastructure throughout the state by training Master Trainers and Train-the-Trainers at Active SWV who could bring the curriculum into diverse communities. As Active SWV completed the Work@Health training, they saw its incredible potential to scale across the region’s diverse worksites. Following the success of an Active SWV Work@Health pilot with the City of Beckley, WV, Work@Health solidified its central role in the Active SWV

workplace wellness program area – and Active SWV was on their way to becoming one of the state’s key providers of Work@Health training.

Healthy Expansion: Active SWV and Work@Health Grow Their Footprint Together

Collaboration between the WVDH and Active SWV has been instrumental in broadening Work@Health’s reach in West Virginia. “We have partnered with Active SWV to train 92 worksites across West Virginia and, through that partnership, have provided funding to more than 45 worksites to promote workplace wellness,” explains James Vance, Associate Director for the Division of Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention at the WVDH and Work@Health Master Trainer, referring to the \$1,500 Capacity Building Grants that Work@Health-trained employers are eligible to apply for. These funds may be used for a wide range of workplace wellness resources such as water stations, lactation rooms, and exercise rooms.



Employees make use of worksite fitness room

Moreover, implementing Work@Health has supported Active SWV’s statewide expansion, helping the organization

Work@Health Takes Root in West Virginia

1

Master Trainer certified

6

Trainers certified

135

Employees trained

92

Worksites impacted



reach beyond their original four-county footprint. Because the Work@Health training can be delivered virtually, it is more conducive to expansion than programming that requires in-person collaboration.

Active SWV now has three in-house Train-the-Trainer level staff members, with an additional four employees who have received Work@Health training. Melanie Seiler, Executive Director of Active SWV, who is training with Vance to become a Master Trainer, also appreciates that Work@Health has provided an avenue for Active SWV to expand beyond physical activity to encompass a more holistic approach to improving population health. Active SWV now works with employers to build awareness around health factors ranging from lactation supports at worksites to providing restful environments for first responders between calls.

At the state level, the WVDH has worked to ensure the long-term sustainability of Work@Health by building a network of trainers, including staff at West Virginia University Extension Service in addition to Active SWV.

Work@Health Helps Employers Implement Site-Specific Wellness Plans

Active SWV has leveraged their strong community relationships and understanding of the needs of individual worksites to recruit a wide range of businesses to participate in Work@Health.

Converting employers to a workplace wellness mindset often starts with looking at return on investment (ROI), says Vance. Once employers see the connection between employee health – those mental health-related absences, for example – and their bottom line, they often become open minded to Work@Health’s objectives. “Employers are interested in ROI,

Where do Work@Health trainers work in West Virginia?

- Active Southern West Virginia
- West Virginia Department of Health
- West Virginia University Extension Service

What kind of employers are they training?

- Manufacturing
- Forestry
- Education
- Banking/Finance
- Automotive
- Government
- Transportation
- Food service
- Healthcare
- Nonprofit
- First responders



“All our other program areas are community-based, so the Work@Health program, being with businesses, has allowed us to touch into other sectors and industries.”

– Melanie Seiler, Executive Director, Active SWV

in lowering their health insurance premiums,” Vance says, “but they also see the value of other Work@Health benefits including increased productivity and increased morale, positivity, and enthusiasm at work.”

The fact that Work@Health isn’t one-size fits all also helps employers see how it can deliver specific, relevant benefits to their workplace. For example, sun protection programs and skin cancer screenings are important for workers that spend a lot of time outdoors, but perhaps less relevant to office workers. “We’re very creative in customizing what it’s going to look like at each worksite because we’re often working within a specific environment,” says Seiler. “Programming for a 25 person workplace is not the same as a 400 person worksite, so Active SWV helps adapt programs to specific worksite realities,” adds Michael Fisher, Workplace Wellness Director, Active SWV, who was also trained by Vance.

Health Equity is a Challenge in West Virginia. Active SWV and Work@Health are Working to Change That.

While Active SWV was founded to serve populations that face the greatest economic and social barriers to health, health equity is a conversation that is just getting started in West Virginia. “There’s a lot of education that’s needed to explain social determinants of health with our businesses and employees, and how current health status isn’t solely based on individual decisions or genetics,” says Seiler.

Access to affordable childcare, a current hot topic across West Virginia, is a key example. “Someone who has to leave work immediately to get their kids from childcare isn’t able to stay and utilize a workplace fitness room, and that is a health equity issue. Sometimes people don’t see it as a health equity gap or issue that a business can help solve,” Seiler explains, but providing opportunities for physical activity during the workday can help address this barrier. Active SWV is leading the conversation and providing a framework for employers and employees alike to view health



as a combination of external and environmental factors, as well as personal choice.

Maintaining Work@Health Momentum at the Annual Conference

The West Virginia Workplace Wellness Conference and Awards is an annual Active SWV event sponsored by the WVDH that features thought leadership and education opportunities around all aspects of workplace health. The conference is a valuable opportunity for employers that have participated in the Active SWV workplace wellness program to connect and learn alongside other businesses interested in workplace health.

“It’s important to bring workplaces together to celebrate successes and share resources,” Vance says. With Active SWV aspiring to create a supportive network for employers who are invested in improving employee health, the annual conference strengthens the collective resolve across West Virginian employers to achieve sustainable improvements that will foster a healthier workforce. The conference also showcases the strength and impact of the WVDH and Active SWV partnership.

Supporting Outcomes with Impact - and Planning for the Future

Improvements to workplace wellness often begin with workplace policies, with even seemingly small changes having a positive impact. In the four years since Work@Health was launched in West Virginia, participating employers have implemented more than 215 policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes within their worksites.

The most common policy improvement that Active SWV has seen employers implement after Work@Health training is the introduction of a policy that allows employees to take 15 minute walk breaks, twice daily. Some employers have also invested in creating walking paths around worksites or incentivizing walk break participation through leaderboards or friendly competitions. Additional PSE examples include adding blood pressure stations, onsite gyms, and lactation rooms to worksites; instituting anti-tobacco policies; and implementing policies that improve flexibility for absences related to healthcare appointments. “When you have a policy in place,” Seiler says, “the changes are more sustainable.”

Looking ahead, Seiler says Active SWV will continue to use Work@Health as a vehicle to implement the West Virginia State Physical Activity Plan, which includes a focus on engaging businesses as change agents to promote physical activity and healthy lifestyles. Additionally, with a new Train-the-Trainer on staff in Active SWV’s youth programming area,

Seiler is looking forward to leveraging strong relationships with school faculty to expand Work@Health training to more schools within the next year.

“We’re also looking to embed more evidence-based programming into the Work@Health curriculum – be it diabetes classes through the National Diabetes Prevention Program or Walk With Ease through the Arthritis Foundation,” Seiler says.



Active SWV staff participate in a fitness break

From Vance’s perspective, there is a lot to be optimistic about, as he believes that Work@Health has established a sustainable foothold in West Virginia that will carry on strong in the years to come. “I would love to see the day where all worksites in West Virginia have Work@Health training to help reduce the burden of chronic disease,” he says.



For information about how to participate in Work@Health, contact Lisa Erck at eerck_ic@chronicdisease.org or visit us at chronicdisease.org/work-at-health.

¹ Integrated Benefits Institute. Cost of poor health infographic. Accessed July 19, 2023. <https://www.ibiweb.org/resource/cost-of-poor-health-infographic-2019-data>

² West Virginia Department of Health. Statistics about the population of West Virginia. Accessed April 24, 2024. https://dhhr.wv.gov/hpcd/data_reports/pages/fast-facts.aspx

