



Oklahoma Embraces Work@Health to Improve Employee Well-being

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.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, 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 a 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 nearly 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.



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Oklahoma Department of Health and Work@Health Team Up to Achieve State Employee Wellness Goals

In 2019, the Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH) was looking to improve employee health statewide. The task would be significant, as Oklahoma work culture has traditionally not been wellness-oriented. “We work in an environment where if you’re at a desk, you don’t get up a lot. We’re not always great about having resources within companies to encourage healthy behaviors while at work,” says Karin Leimbach, a Work@Health Master Trainer and Community Analysis and Linkages professional at the OSDH.

This kind of work culture can take a toll on employees’ health, with obesity affecting 2 in 5 Oklahomans, and 2 in 5 reporting experiencing poor mental health days. “We see a lot of burnout and low morale,” Karin explains. “I think people often feel better at a workplace that cares about them – and they’re more likely to put time back into that place.”

As OSDH staff explored options for supporting employee health in workplaces across Oklahoma, Work@Health stood out as a turn-key program that could advance their internal employee wellness goals *and* help them be more effective advocates and partners for all Oklahomans. Julie Dearing, who works in the OSDH’s Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, signed up to become a Work@Health trainer. In order to experience the program and serve as a model for other employers, the OSDH enrolled in the first group of employers that Julie trained. By 2020, the OSDH had completed training and began implementing the program internally as well as integrating Work@Health into their outreach to other Oklahoma employers.

By participating as an employer, the OSDH has been able to see the positive impact of Work@Health firsthand. “Burnout has decreased,” Karin says, “and there’s been more participation in our employee wellness program.” With OSDH employees embracing and helping co-create a healthier work culture, they are better positioned to do the essential work of supporting state and local health initiatives.

“When we get employers trained, we build sustainability. By the end of the training, they’re empowered and ready to take action.”



– Karin Leimbach, MPH, Certified Healthy Consultant, Community Analysis and Linkages | OSDH

The ripple effect can be felt throughout Oklahoma: As of 2023, the OSDH has brought Work@Health training to 49 Oklahoma employers. The goal is to reach 100 new employers by 2026.

Leveraging Work@Health to Close Gaps

Working to close the health gap between rural and urban communities, the OSDH focuses Work@Health employer recruiting efforts on regions with low access to preventive healthcare. “We have places in the state where there are poorer health outcomes or poor access to health resources. We focus on these areas so we can lift people up who need it most,” Julie explains. Work@Health has been an effective driver of health in Oklahoma in its commitment to training employers.

Work@Health Addresses Key Employer Concerns

To generate interest in the program, the OSDH has been strategic in addressing employer concerns. Julie acknowledges that Work@Health has encountered some employers that view employee health as a personal matter separate from the workplace. To shift this perspective, Work@Health trainers are careful to define the program’s objective of making healthier choices *easier*, not mandatory, for employees. This framing helps employers see the value and relevance of workplace wellness training. “The program is practical, tangible, and

Work@Health Takes Root in Oklahoma

2

Master Trainers certified

5

Trainers certified

49

Employers trained

24,000+

Employees impacted



therefore approachable,” says Julie, which helps employers feel confident that their participation will be a worthwhile time investment.

Another aspect of Work@Health that appeals to employers is its potential to bend the cost curve on employee health insurance plans and increase employee engagement and productivity. According to the CDC, employee absence related to high blood pressure, diabetes, smoking, physical inactivity, and obesity alone costs U.S. employers an estimated \$36.4 billion annually in 2015 dollars.² While Work@Health is not an immediate solution to the high cost of employee healthcare, many employers are able to achieve a return on investment within 3-5 years.

Where do Work@Health trainers work in Oklahoma?

- Oklahoma State Department of Health
- Local county health departments
- Health Alliance for the Uninsured
- Behavioral health professionals serving rural areas
- Regional hospitals
- Community-based organizations

What kind of employers are they training?

- Schools, colleges, and universities
- Nonprofit organizations
- Manufacturers
- Hospital systems
- Municipalities

Strong Partnerships Accelerate Employee Wellness Initiatives Across Oklahoma

The OSDH has strategically integrated Work@Health into Certified Healthy Oklahoma, a free, statewide certification that showcases organizations that are committed to supporting healthy choices through environmental and policy change. Certified Healthy Oklahoma uses a simple rating system to help employers understand employee health and well-being at their organization. Employers who don't achieve an "excellent" rating are referred to Work@Health, which then invites employers into the program.

What's next for Work@Health in Oklahoma?

- Train more employers at the county level
- Implement a formal evaluation process to measure and monitor program outcomes
- Bolster employee health in schools by training leaders across school districts
- Accelerate program scalability by training more trainers across the state

“Health educators, if they’re not provided a turnkey program like Work@Health, have to build something themselves. As a comprehensive program, Work@Health provides that uniformity at the local level.”

– Julie Dearing, PhD, MS, State Programs Coordinator, Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion | OSDH

Like many successful public health initiatives, Work@Health doesn't stay in a single lane. Instead, it has become an invaluable vehicle for expanding the reach of OSDH programs including tobacco cessation, obesity reduction, physical activity promotion, closing the income gap on cancer screening access, and other interventions such as Walk With Ease, a physical activity and self-management program developed by the Arthritis Foundation.

Work@Health has also built bridges into local business communities by recruiting and working with business influencers and directly working with employers. Not only has this expanded the reach of Work@Health, but it has built partnerships and pathways that the OSDH can leverage for other programs and initiatives. For example, after completing Work@Health training in 2021, the YMCA of Greater Oklahoma City utilized the assessment tools to identify program gaps, updated their health and wellness policies, and improved the quality of their staff wellness program. In addition, the YMCA is a stakeholder in the Oklahoma state obesity plan and a Certified Healthy Business.

Looking ahead, Karin is confident in the future of Work@Health because she has already seen it grow and evolve. Delivering on its vision of empowering employers to create healthy work environments, reaching as many communities and employers as possible, is at the heart of Work@Health's ethos. “When we get employers trained, we build sustainability,” Karin says. “By the end of the training, they're empowered and ready to take action. They leave feeling confident.”



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 Asay GRB, Roy K, Lang JE, Payne RL, Howard DH. Absenteeism and employer costs associated with chronic diseases and health risk factors in the US workforce. *Prev Chronic Dis.* 2016;13:E141. doi:10.5888/pcd13.150503

