

## Fight Recession With Health

by Tim Size, Executive Director, Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative, Sauk City

“What is good for General Motors is good for the country.” We used to say that. But now it is more like “What is good for we Baby Boomers is good for the country.” In any event, this huge generation is aging into becoming patients. The tremors of this shift will hit our country for the next twenty years.

I am an aging “cheesehead” and proud of it. I know all too well Wisconsin’s justly famous beer, cheese and brats. But my primary care physician, workplace wellness program and a life event wacked me on the head. I am lucky. This dose of personal health reform has led to overdue life-style changes. Hopefully I will stay on track. Multiply my story by millions of fellow cheese heads and you see the bigger challenge.

Our workforce is getting older. Older workers are more likely to consume more health care as age and habits catch up with us. Poorer health, at any age, makes us less productive at work and increases our use of sick days. This costs employers more. More cost to employers make them less competitive. Being less competitive means fewer jobs for us and for our kids.

A recent report from the Council of Economic Advisors to President Obama drives this point home. “Slowing the growth in health care spending from 6 percent a year to 4.5 would have enormous benefits for the economy. It would create as many as 500,000 jobs a year and increase annual income for a family of four by \$2,600.”

### RWHC Eye On Health



“I have been receiving reports that you are allowing more than one donut per customer.”

No amount of “healthcare reform” can fix our own behaviors. We must work to reduce the amount of care our system needs to deliver. We must get serious about doing what we can to get and stay healthy. We need to do this as individuals, workplaces and communities.

We can speed up making healthy lifestyles a Wisconsin trademark. Rural has an extra challenge. There are 72 counties in Wisconsin. Most urban counties in Wisconsin are among the healthiest counties. Rural counties are often the least healthy. For the last five years, the Governor’s rural health council and the state’s two medical schools supported a Strong Rural Communities Initiative. Hospitals, public health agencies and employers worked together in six rural communities to help employees and their families become healthier. Changes in diet and exercise are encouraging and the work continues.

Wisconsin's "Worksite Wellness Resource Kit" is a great free online resource for employers. Use Google to find it. The kit focuses on changing behaviors to reduce chronic diseases. Specific activities relate to health risk appraisals, physical activity, nutrition and tobacco use.

Many workplaces are working to help employees make healthier decisions. Employees are more likely to make healthier choices when workplace policies promote health and reduce risk of disease. Employee wellness committees are key to worksite success. All of us are more likely to respond when we hear clear expectations and are part of deciding how they can be met.

A new approach to workplace wellness is sponsored by Thrive. Thrive is a collaborative economic development enterprise for 8 counties in southern Wisconsin. Three dozen major healthcare organizations have developed a bold plan to improve the health of the region's workforce. They are starting with themselves.

By 2011, the target is a 10 percent increase with those having formal wellness programs. The 3-year goal is a 10 percent improvement in employees choosing a healthier life style. The goal is to eat enough fruits and vegetables, be physically active, be at low or no-risk regarding alcohol and tobacco use. The 5-year goal is for 60 percent of workforce to be at a healthy weight.

These goals may seem too modest. But they are a major step towards making our region and our state a healthier place. We have started and hopefully more of Wisconsin will as well.