

## Employers find novel solutions to health costs

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All day long, real estate agents in the San Diego and Carlsbad offices of **Grubb & Ellis/BRE Commercial** suck down protein shakes designed to make them more energetic, less achy and ready for the stress of high-stakes real estate. The shakes contain lean whey protein, an omega oil blend, something called "Greenery," fruit and water. "I really believe in having healthy employees," said company President and Chief Executive John Frager, who started consuming the shakes in 2000 while working for a national competitor. He came to BRE Commercial in June 2002 and called up Lisa Leslie, a certified clinical nutritionist, professional speaker and seller of the EnergyFirst products. The company orders eight cases of the shake kits every five months at a cost of about \$1,500. High-powered blenders cost \$360 a piece. Frager said it's well worth it. "People really enjoy it. They feel better. They're sick less. Their energy levels are higher," Frager said. "The blender's going off all day around here." Leslie also provided a wellness seminar when the program began, offering Frager's real estate agents a tutorial on biochemistry and the primary causes of bad moods, headaches and high body fat. Turns out to have a lot to do with dehydration, lack of oxygen and poor nutrition. Leslie said most office workers breathe incorrectly all day and substitute pure water for dehydrating substances in coffee, sodas (diet too) and artificial sweeteners. "Most people might go to the gym and work out and then go home and eat burgers and Cokes and wonder why they're not feeling well," said Leslie, who regularly provides lifestyle and nutrition speeches at corporate executive and health care conferences. Leslie, who also works for EnergyFirst's parent company **NutriScience Corp.** in Hermosa Beach, Calif., said she's been getting a considerable amount of business from local real estate companies.

It's just one of the novel ways employers are seeking to encourage employees to live more healthfully. The ultimate goal is reduced sick days, increased productivity and, hopefully in the long run, reducing the cost of health care premiums that has become a major issue in the presidential election. Programs vary according to the stresses of the job. Sales agents need energy and employees who spend a lot of time sitting need to find opportunities to move. North County Health Services launched a walking-based exercise program that encourages its more than 450 employees to work themselves up to the recommended 10,000 steps a day. NCHS purchased \$10 pedometers in bulk and advised employees to continuously add 200 to 250 steps to their daily routine. Mary Sammer, a registered dietician who is leading the effort with Dr. Kenneth Morris, has had to order shipments of the pedometers three times since the program was launched Sept. 15. Walkers are split into teams and a team captain catalogs everyone's incremental improvement. Participants are also required to make a nutrition goal such as eating breakfast daily or bringing lunch from home instead of eating out. Having a supportive chief executive is essential, Sammer said, even when the cost is minimal. Sammer and Morris investigated the idea before pitching it to their CEO. "Obviously, if you have healthy employees, you have less health issues," Sammer said. "It has to be embraced from the top." According to the Center for Studying Health System Change, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, D.C., employers suffered double-digit increases in health care premiums for three consecutive years culminating in 2003 with a 13.9 percent rise -- the highest annual increase since 1990. The center studied employers with more than 500 employees in 12 metropolitan communities from 2002-03, including Orange County, and found businesses slow to respond to the problem. Instead, employers are incrementally shifting costs to workers through larger premium contributions or higher co-pays for doctor's visits and prescriptions. These strategies apparently have broader potential beyond just passing costs to someone else. According to human resources consultant firm **Towers Perrin**, some employers say they make employees better consumers of health care and less likely to see a doctor for minor problems like a cold.

San Diego-based Sharp Health Plan is trying to get its employer groups to be more proactive to reduce health care costs. The nonprofit health care and coverage provider is launching a new initiative dubbed "Live Sharp Every Day" to encourage the development of worksite wellness programs that promote exercise and nutrition. Jeff Lazenby, director of business development, said the initiative is aimed at Sharp's largest employer groups and will eventually be rolled out to all members. Sharp's 1,200 commercial clients in San Diego and Riverside counties account for about 60,000 of the health plan's 125,000 members. "As an HMO our whole philosophy is about encouraging folks to access preventive care," Lazenby said. "One of the problems that we continually find is that as a country we're just getting less healthy, eating poorly and exercising less." Sharp estimates that inactivity, excess weight and obesity cost California \$24.6 billion annually in lost productivity, workers' compensation and care for preventable diseases. And although the United States spends more on health care than any other country, 125 million Americans live with chronic conditions, and millions of new cases are diagnosed each year. Sharp is reaching out to employers to create lunch seminars on nutrition and exercise and encouraging them to develop worksite programs.

Bud Sayles, executive director of San Diego In-Home Supportive Services Public Authority, is working with Sharp to develop classes on back care and stress relief. The quasi-government organization provides more than 16,000 home health care workers to disabled county residents who need an array of very personal services from cooking and cleaning to assistance with grooming and personal hygiene. Sayles, a quadriplegic who receives such services himself, said the work takes a physical and emotional toll from providers, who are paid \$8.50 an hour and frequently work seven days a week with no vacation. The organization has a cap on workload at 300 hours a month -- 75 hours a week. Sayles said Sharp has been creative in suggesting ideas for the provider population, most of which don't have access to the Internet and would have a hard time coming to a centralized worksite meeting. The agency hopes to help its employees become more effective managers of their health care coverage including navigating the medical system.

