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Driving business success and improving population health: Business leaders and health experts join forces to launch “Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities”

EDINA, Minn. (April 30, 2014)—The culture and environment in which we live and work has been proven to influence our health outcomes. For example, studies have shown that people with an immediate family member or close friend who is obese are 57 percent more likely to become obese themselves¹, and people working in small companies are 34 percent more likely to quit smoking if one of their co-workers also quits smoking². This connection between health and culture—workplace, community and home—is at the core of a new initiative called “Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities,” which brings together business leaders and health experts to define the most effective path for extending corporate health strategies to improve community and population health.

The “Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities” initiative is being led by [HERO](#) (Health Enhancement Research Organization) and is based on the belief by business and health experts that improving community health will also advance current and future business priorities. The organizations involved in this initiative are collaborating with HERO to define the most effective path toward this goal.

Developing a collective mindset on workplace and community health

The “Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities” initiative recently brought together business and health care thought leaders for a kick-off event that was co-hosted by HERO and HealthPartners. During this meeting, health and business leaders worked to identify a collective mindset around the business benefit for employers in advancing health at the community level and the perspective that achieving health objectives (such as reducing obesity, improving physical activity, and managing chronic disease) will be very difficult without the business community’s active engagement. The significance of health improvement as a factor of business success, and a need to understand the elements of the business case are becoming increasingly clear to many stakeholders.

According to Catherine Baase, global director of health services for The Dow Chemical Company and co-chair of the HERO committee that created “Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities,” the goal is to simultaneously drive business success and community-level health improvement through employer leadership, and to give employers across the country the business insight, knowledge and resources to drive change in their communities, thereby producing better business outcomes and healthier communities.

“When the business community has a compelling business case and the framework for action, great things happen,” said Baase. “The ‘Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities’ initiative is grounded in this approach, along with a solid base of employer-community success stories to anchor a business rationale for why companies should commit to the health of their communities. Together, the organizations that are involved in ‘Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities’ will move further and faster, by developing guidance and online resources to help companies of all sizes get involved in community health in a meaningful way that also benefits their own bottom line and business priorities.”

The “Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities” initiative was developed by a volunteer committee of employers and health experts under the guidance of HERO. The kick-off event was funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and featured more than 60 attendees from the public and private sectors, including 13 employers whose workforces extend around the world.

In addition to funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, HERO received support/assistance from the Federal Reserve Banks of Dallas, Minneapolis, and San Francisco; the Clinton Health Matters Initiative; Hope Street Group; BSR (Business Social Responsibility); Samueli Institute; the Blue Zones Project by Healthways; and the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index.

Learning from the past to create an informed future

“Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities” was conceived by HERO members and is based in part on an [environmental scan](#) that was commissioned and funded by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) Roundtable on Population Health Improvement. This report summarizes the current state of employer-community health and includes interviews with thought leaders, a review of published research studies, and business considerations for committing company resources to community health.

“The first logical step for this initiative was to learn what is already being done in this area, which is what we accomplished through the environmental scan,” said Nico Pronk, vice president and chief science officer for HealthPartners and co-chair of the “Healthy Workplaces, Healthy Communities” committee. “Through this process, we learned that many efforts are underway, using a wide variety of methods and involving many different partners. However, there is very little cross-fertilization of efforts and sharing of results, which means no clear path has been identified or communicated in any way that can be used by other organizations or that will help employers conduct this work efficiently and effectively.”

Input from business leaders will be used to shape and create a repository of information about investing in health and the community, along with a roadmap and related tools and resources that will provide the business case and clear path forward for companies that see the business value in committing to community health. The online resources are expected to be available in 2015.

“Every day, American employers face a one-two punch when it comes to rising costs that stem from employees’ lifestyle-related health problems. The only way to fight back is to address both of these enormous challenges at the same time by working to improve and maintain overall employee wellness through a comprehensive approach that involves the employer as well as community stakeholders,” said Scott Peterson, executive vice president of the Schwan Food Company. “Employers must directly engage employees to educate, foster awareness and instill personal accountability with respect to behaviors that adversely impact health outcomes; because neither growing health care costs nor the lost productivity are sustainable in the future.”

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About HERO – Based in Edina, Minn., HERO (the Health Enhancement Research Organization) is a non-profit corporation dedicated to the creation and dissemination of employee health management research, education, policy, strategy, and leadership. HERO was established in 1996 as a not-for-profit, 501(c)3 corporation to create high quality employee health management (EHM) research, especially that dealing with the impact of modifiable health risks on health care costs. To learn more, visit www.the-hero.org.

¹ “The Spread of Obesity in a Large Social Network over 32 Years.” Nicholas A. Christakis, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H., and James H. Fowler, Ph.D. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 2007; 357:370-379 July 26, 2007 DOI: 10.1056/NEJMsa066082

² “The Collective Dynamics of Smoking in a Large Social Network.” Nicholas A. Christakis, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H., and James H. Fowler, Ph.D. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 2008; 358:2249-2258 May 22, 2008 DOI: 10.1056/NEJMsa0706154