

Reforming Health Care One Community at a Time

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Long before President Obama's health-care reform was signed into law, businesses and health-care leaders in Rochester, N.Y. were setting the bar pretty high on wellness and improving the quality, affordability and accessibility to health care.

Thanks to their dedication, collaboration and business acumen, they succeeded, and in turn reinforced the view of some experts that claim reform starts locally, and is transplantable to the national level one community at a time.

Rochester, N.Y.: A Community With a Rich Health-Care Legacy

Privately-held supermarket chain Wegmans is an all-star example of creating a wellness program for employees with its "people-first" philosophy.

The company hosts an eight-week challenge called "Eat Well, Live Well," which encourages employees to eat five cups of fruits and vegetables daily and increase their physical activity to 10,000 steps per day that is monitored on a pedometer Wegmans provides. To make the challenge livelier, stores compete against each other, and no one likes to lose.

"We added simple prizes, but it was the bragging rights that really mattered," says Paul Speranza, who has been with the company for 35 years and wears his pedometer daily. He says employees climb stairs and avoid elevators to increase their activity rate. "Basic activities like that build wellness behaviors that go a long way to making employees happier and more productive at work."

In 2005 Speranza, who also serves as chairman of the board of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, attended a meeting in Washington, D.C. where the Chamber met with the

American Hospital Association and other health care leaders from the American Medical Association and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as well as executives from major health insurers. They were there to determine initiatives that could be accomplished in local communities, with relatively little cost and time, and don't require a change in law or regulation at the Federal or state level.

Speranza returned to Rochester energized and joined forces with Sandy Parker, president and CEO of the Rochester Business Allianceto bring the ideas to fruition.

A Need to Collaborate

Speranza and Parker realized that employers needed assistant implementing wellness programs and brought together a seven Rochester-based company consortium comprised of Xerox, Paychex, Kodak, Jasco Tools, Bausch & Lomb, Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), and Wegmans. They also created a partnership with the Rochester Business Alliance to form the Rochester Business Alliance Health Care Initiative (The Alliance).

Indeed, "Eat Well, Live Well" became a model for one of the group's five initial initiatives, says Speranza who heads The Alliance planning committee. And the attack mode with which business leaders identify and solve issues sets the tone for execution as demonstrated in the following report card summary of their founding five initiatives:



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- Lean Six Sigma in Hospitals – Called in efficiency experts from the seven participating companies and worked with the three largest hospital systems to improve efficiency efforts. Overall hospital system financial benefits are expected to total more than \$24 million for 2008-2010.
- Rochester Regional Health Information Organization (RHIO)– Provided manpower and funds to create and run the RHIO, a community-wide health information technology effort to improve the quality of care and realize health system operating efficiencies when moving clinical information. The system has 2,800 users across 230 organizations and delivers more than 200,000 clinical test results each month.
- Increased Utilization of Generics – Developed a program to increase generic drug use--a strategy the large employers were following but the small employers were not. With the average cost of a brand-name medication approximately nine times the cost of a generic, the 4.8% increase in the generic fill rate from 2007 to 2008 significantly contributed to cost savings which now total \$76 million.
- Physician Compensation – Supported a proposed \$20 million physician's reimbursement increase, provided the cost would be shared by the hospital systems and Excellus, a regional health care provider. The action averted a physician shortage and mitigated provider competition that was sending Rochester's previously low nationally comparative health care costs upward. Initial offset savings have totaled more than \$120 million.
- "Eat Well Live Well" – The Wegmans' program was expanded to other companies. More than 125,000 participants from more than 300 local organizations participate, making it, "to our knowledge, the largest community-wide wellness initiative in the world," Speranza says. "Participants have walked approximately 49 billion steps and eaten 20 million cups of fruit and vegetables."

What People Can Accomplish

The Federal government is taking note of the success in Rochester. The U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services gave Rochester two awards: one for its overall health-care collaborative efforts and one for the "Eat Well Live Well" program.

The Alliance is now partnering with the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency to tackle health-specific community issues, identifying one issue at a time, executing well, and using it as a model for future endeavors. The steering committee is made up of 63 individuals from 40 local and state organizations and raised \$1.5 million: \$1 million from a local foundation, the rest from New York state funding.

The group's first issue was high blood pressure. Subcommittees created medical guidelines for all physicians and has them talking in language and using illustrations, tactics and even games that people can understand. The group also designated a plan design committee that investigated how to create meaningful health plans customized to specific demographics, making a proportionate effort in communities and among ethnic groups that have a greater predisposition to hypertension.

"The Rochester initiative shows the degree to which corporate and community leaders can go to establish and reach a goal," says New York State Assemblyman Joe Morelle, who chairs the Assembly's standing committee on insurance.

Morelle emphasizes that much of the Rochester work can be implemented on the state and national level; its mission also aligns with the work of the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation spawned by the new health legislation. "The Alliance is looking for ways to bend the cost curve," Morelle says. "We can build on this regional plan--the infrastructure, best practices and electronic medical record system--and not reinvent the wheel."

But the Alliance isn't waiting for Washington to catch up.

"We've funded everything outside of government. If national health-care initiatives help us... fine," says Speranza.

"Success begets success. This religion of health travels by word of mouth."