

## Workplace Wellness Results in Service Excellence

### In January 2011, the City announced its first Biggest Loser contest – an employee weight loss and peer support challenge.

For Enza Commisso, a service clerk at the City of Guelph's West End Recreation Centre, the contest launch was especially timely. She had just received shocking news at her doctor's office. "My cholesterol was high and I was on the verge of getting diabetes," she says. "I was told to lose weight or I'd have to go on medication."

Initially, Commisso was reluctant to apply, but her manager, Eleanor Millie, encouragingly said, "We'll do it together." Both decided to enter their names and stories for the chance to be contestants.

The Biggest Loser contest, inspired by the popular television show, was created as part of the City's People Practices Strategy. It contains new and updated human resource policies to achieve four goals: a well workplace; learning; leadership; and service excellence.

"One of our major goals is to develop a well workplace," says Aidan Prince, formerly an organizational development specialist with the City. "Improving employee wellness reduces sick time and benefits costs, improves productivity and helps attract and retain top employees."

## WELLNESS AT WORK

The City established a wellness committee made up of employees representing all departments and sites. Committee members volunteer their time to plan wellness activities based on employee feedback and health data, such as absenteeism and benefits use.

"We find out what's ailing people and then target programming to address that," says Prince. "The two biggest health issues are stress and weight management. We want to inspire people to get fit and eat well. Our secondary goal is to increase camaraderie. The weight loss challenge is a big, visual way to do this."

To her surprise, Commisso was chosen as one of the 10 contestants. During the 12-week challenge, she met regularly with a personal trainer for exercise and nutrition advice. At lunch hour, she did an aquafit class or walked laps in the recreation centre, accompanied by "hyped" co-workers.

Along with other contestants, she blogged about her progress (measurements and percentage weight loss) on the City's website for employees. Contestants and other employees posted encouragement and nutrition/fitness tips. "The 13,474 views on these website pages show there was widespread employee interest," says Prince.

Other City employees, including Sherry Hoysa, joined an offshoot of the contest – the Biggest Loser Club. An administrative assistant at Guelph-Wellington Emergency Medical Service (EMS), Hoysa received support through the club blog and from co-workers, family and friends. As well, Hoysa attended seminars –that were open to all City employees –on topics such as grocery store survival. By combining this challenge and a subsequent fitness challenge at Guelph-Wellington EMS, Hoysa lost 64 pounds in six months. Now she reports better sleep, improved allergy symptoms, fewer headaches and consistent energy.

## WELLNESS STRATEGY

As part of the City's wellness strategy, employees can choose from a full menu of lunch time or after work classes including yoga, pilates and stress management. "We've had wonderful feedback," says Prince. More than 1,100 employees enrolled in City wellness programs in 2011.

"This is all about bringing better service to the public," says Mark Amorosi, executive director of Corporate and Human Resources. "There's a direct link between investing in our staff and quality of service."

Already, Amorosi has identified a decline in employee turnover. Soon, he expects to see the full impact of the wellness programs. "Literature shows if you invest in wellness programs for staff, over time the return on investment is a three-to-one ratio. Any organization is only as strong as the people who work here." Healthier employees result in reduced benefit costs, less absenteeism and an improved level of customer service.

Commisso, after her Biggest Loser challenge, would have to agree. Now her cholesterol and blood sugar issues are gone. "I feel like I got the old Enza back – slim and happy. And I have more energy for work."