

DelaWELL Keeps Delaware Budget, Employees in Good Shape

By Mary Branham Dusenberry

Susan Graham had been on every diet imaginable, but she was still packing nearly 200 pounds on her 5-foot-6-inch frame around this time last year.

"I'd have goals and I'd want to exercise when I got home, but time was just never there," said Graham, who works in the Delaware Economic Development Office, "because I put everyone else first."

Then came DelaWELL, an innovative Delaware program aimed at improving the health of the state's employees, retirees and their families. The program is one of eight winners of CSG's 2008 Innovations Awards.

"It's not rocket science," said Jennifer "JJ" Davis, director of the state's Office of Management and Budget, which runs the program. "It's a relatively straightforward way to implement wellness in your health care program that has tangible results."

Finding those tangible results—including saving money for the state while improving the health of its work force—was a challenge issued to Davis' office by Gov. Ruth Ann Minner. But DelaWELL answers the challenge by assessing health risks and providing personalized strategies to help Delaware state employees and their families address specific health care needs. DelaWELL also offers participants online resources and tips for health care.

What started as a small pilot project with only 100 participants, has quickly grown to nearly 68,000 participants as it has evolved with the needs of members, according to Davis.

"We really went on a grass-

roots campaign, talking to people and saying 'what would engage you in your health care?'" Davis said.

One answer they found most often was education. "(Participants) really needed to know about their own biometrics," Davis said.

And DelaWELL makes it easier for participants to learn that information about themselves. Biometric health screenings are done onsite at many state offices, and workers have the opportunity to participate in wellness activities. Last spring, Davis said, DelaWELL held a run/walk event and had to turn people away.

"We thought we wouldn't get more than 50 people to do the run/walk, and we had to shut down registration when we hit 600," she said.

Part of the reason for the success of the program may be the incentives offered by the program—those who participate in a health risk assessment and biometric screening receive a \$100 pre-tax bonus, for instance—but part of it may also be the motivation provided through e-mails and information about health care.

At least that was the case for Graham.

"I think to be successful, you have to have daily affirmations ... the daily reminders of what health really means, and you have to be accepting of it," said Graham, who has lost 59 pounds since she began the program last November.

And, Graham said, it doesn't hurt to be competitive, like with the Governor's Challenge and the Lieutenant Governor's Challenge. The competition in the run/walks, she said, was a source of motivation. "It was exciting to



DelaWELL participants race in one of the program's run/walk events.

say I ran my mile and a half today, or I ran my two miles today. I'm a very competitive person by nature, and that helped motivate me," she said.

She's not alone.

The DelaWELL Web site—www.delaWELL.delaware.gov—is filled with testimonials, and the results can be seen easily in how the program has grown.

Davis said DelaWELL promised that any savings in health care costs would be put back into the program. That promise was fulfilled, in one way, with the addition of Weight Watchers in February. Since that program was launched, participants have lost more than 7,000 pounds

collectively as of September, according to Davis.

Individual employees aren't the only winners. The state has kept health care costs flat for three years. And Davis said people are more engaged—they are absent less and are more productive.

She said the program has been replicated in the private sector, and could easily be adopted by other states.

"Investing in health care before you really need it seems like an unusual investment, particularly in tight budget times," Davis said. "For us, it just makes sense and now we can demonstrate how it makes sense."

FAST FACTS

- Delaware state employees receive a \$100 pre-tax incentive paycheck bonus when they attend a biometric screening and complete a health risk assessment through DelaWELL.
- DelaWELL offers employees the opportunity to monitor their health online; the agency contracts with an outside vendor to provide those services.
- DelaWELL is funded by the State Employee Benefits Committee, which approved a \$1.4 million budget, plus \$500,000 for incentives, over a two-year period.