

EXPLORER PIPELINE

As human resources manager for Explorer Pipeline in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Michelle Griffith oversees the company's wellness program, which includes an incentive program for employees who exercise, seminars, a health fair and an email newsletter. Griffith, a fitness buff, is an enthusiastic participant in the program herself. Among other activities, she runs several times a week during lunch with a group of Explorer employees.

Griffith takes pride in her company's program. "We've had people quit smoking," she said. "We've had people lose weight, and we've had people start exercising more."

The company owns and runs a pipeline that transports crude oil, jet fuel, diesel fuel and other petroleum products from Port Arthur, Texas to Indiana. Nearly 1,900 miles long, the pipeline handles about 200 million barrels a year. Half of the company's 200 employees work in Tulsa, while the other half work at seven locations spread along the length of the pipeline. These workers run the gamut, from accountants to secretaries to pipeline repair experts.

Although it has a dispersed workforce, the company feels a strong loyalty to its employees. "Since we're a small company, we're close-knit," said Griffith. "We're like a family. And we want to take care of our family."

Explorer's wellness program was started in 2007 by former CEO Tim Felt. A former U.S. Army captain who graduated from West Point, Felt believes strongly in the value of wellness and the importance of healthy living.

Felt said that the wellness program not only helps employees' health, but can also improve the bottom line. "The company is paying a significant amount of employee health care costs," he said. "That means I've got a vested interest in keeping workers healthy. So there's a financial interest — and it's just the right thing to do."

There is evidence to support him: in a 2010 review of studies on wellness, researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health found that for every dollar a company spends on wellness programs, it saves about \$3.27 in medical costs and about \$2.73 on absentee costs.³¹⁵

Felt, who is now the CEO at Colonial Pipeline outside Atlanta, said that the idea for the program first occurred to him at a company meeting at which donuts were the featured snack. Afterwards, one overweight employee came up to Felt and said it was hard to lose weight in an environment in which high-calorie foods were the only choice. "From that point on," Felt said, "I decided that if the company was paying for the food, there was going to be a healthy alternative." At future meetings, fruit and water were always part of the offerings.

Felt said the new policy made a difference. "It's amazing how many people will eat the fruit or drink the water, if you make it available," he said.

Felt, who regularly bikes, lifts weights and works on an elliptical trainer, then expanded Explorer's program beyond serving

healthier food at meetings. A committee of eight employees began developing ideas, and in 2008, Explorer rolled out its program. The effort includes an incentive program that pays employees \$30 per quarter if they reach certain health-related targets, such as taking an annual physical, participating in a wellness seminar, running in road races, and taking certain vitamins, as well as prescribed medicines. Every week, Griffith sends employees a weekly email that includes articles on wellness and health recipes.

In the past two years, Griffith has added new features to Explorer's effort. Every month, the company holds seminars on a range of health- and wellness-related topics. Recent seminars have focused on strategies to improve diet and nutrition, and stress management. The meetings take place at the Tulsa headquarters; to ensure that workers in other locations don't miss out, the seminars are videotaped and webcast.

Explorer also puts on an annual health fair. It offers flu shots, and screenings for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, and other ailments. In 2011, Griffith helped start a lunchtime walking and running program. A few times a week, groups of employees in the Tulsa office walk or run together for between 30 minutes and an hour. "It's a great way to break up the day," said Griffith. The program also reimburses employees up to \$50 a month for their health club membership. To get the discount, workers must go to the club at least eight times a month.

So far, she said, about one-quarter of the company's workers are participating in at least some part of the voluntary wellness program.

To entice employees to participate, the program includes regular health challenges. Every three months, Explorer encourages workers to improve on a specific aspect of wellness: eating five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, or exercising for at least 30 minutes at least five times a week.

A significant percentage of the company's employees work outside; these workers have somewhat different health concerns than do more sedentary office workers. In the summer of 2011, for instance, the company focused on encouraging employees to drink enough water every day — something that is especially important for those working outside in the heat.

Griffith said that it is difficult to gauge how much money the wellness program has saved the company. But she notes that the company's health insurance costs have not risen over the past few years. The overall number of health insurance claims filed by employees has also dropped.

Felt, the company's former CEO, agrees that calculating savings from wellness programs is tricky. But he is confident that the programs can have a positive influence on employees — so confident that he has started a wellness program at his new company too.

"This is about helping employees to go in the right direction in terms of their health," he said.