

Local Businesses Active in Promoting Employee Health and Wellness

By *Debbi Mack*, STAFF WRITER

Many Howard County businesses offer health and wellness programs for their employees. Some have done so for years; others are just starting. In any case, these programs are becoming increasingly popular among local employees and are gaining support from local health care, government and other sources.

APL Supports Exercise and Fitness Clubs by Building New Facilities

For years, The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory (APL) has had employee clubs, including those focused on sports, health and fitness. The Exercise Club, or gym, and the Fitness Club, an exercise class program, both started small, but grew enough for the lab to build them state-of-the-art, on-site facilities with locker rooms and showers, which opened in the summer 2004.

The Exercise Club started as a small room with a few pieces of home-style exercise equipment and about 30 or 40 members when the club's current president, Scott Denny, joined APL in 1979. Over the years, club membership grew and equipment was upgraded and supplemented.

Exercise Club Membership Triples When New Gym Opens

"When we moved into the new gym, our membership went

from 250 or 300 members to 900 before the end of the year," Denny said. Since then, membership has held at about 1,000 members.

The Exercise Club's latest facilities are on a par with commercial gyms, according to Denny. "We pretty much have anything you could possibly want," he said, including a variety of equipment, television sets and a music sound system.

Employees pay \$35 a year to join the Exercise Club and get nearly 24/7 access to the gym, which closes only from 4 a.m. to 5:30 a.m. for the janitors to clean. This allows people on shift work to use it at decidedly off-peak hours. "You'll see people there at one or two in the morning," Denny said.

Fitness Club Grows From One Aerobics Class to Six Different Classes

The Fitness Club grew out of a step-aerobics class initially taught by a contractor in the company cafeteria in 1996. When issues with the contractor came up, rather than discontinue the class, the students decided to form the Fitness Club, an in-house exercise program.

Since then, the club's offerings have expanded to six classes: pilates, jazzercise, "total body workout" (muscle-toning floor exercises), tai chi, yoga and "awareness through movement" (the Feldenkrais method,

which reduces pain and increases flexibility through slow, gentle motions). Classes follow various schedules, but are collectively held five days a week, in the morning, at lunch and after work. Fitness Club dues are \$5 every six months, plus a minimal fee per class.

The classes are also taught now in a new workout room with cushioned hardwood floors designed especially for exercising. The room also features floor-to-ceiling mirrors, like the workout rooms at an outside gym.

"Our jazzercise, pilates, yoga and my class [total body workout] are popular," according to Maggie Sands, president of the Fitness Club. Although tai chi and "awareness through movement" have a much lower turnout, Sands says the club won't discontinue a class based on lack of attendance, as long as the instructor is willing to teach it.

APL Committee Developing Integrated Health Program

APL also has a Health Improvement Committee, formed a couple of years ago to promote and maintain optimal health and well-being at the lab by developing an integrated health improvement program, according to Sands. Among other things, the committee schedules monthly lunchtime speakers on various topics, such as heart disease, stress management and nutrition. The committee has also arranged

free flu shots and cholesterol screenings for employees.

Accounting Firm Encourages 'Power Napping'

The accounting firm of Berman Goldman & Ribakow (BGR) in Ellicott City tries "to encourage a good work-life balance," according to Marc Rubin, BGR's managing partner. Now, when accountants grow weary from crunching numbers, the firm has a room where they can take a nap.

"During tax season, you can be working 10 to 12 hours, six or seven days a week," Rubin said. However, after a 20- or 30-minute "power" nap, Rubin said, "I'm a brand new person."

The nap room is a four-by-eight-foot room with a locking door, which the firm created in December from space added during an expansion. The room is painted light blue and is furnished with a comfortable leather recliner, table, lamp, timer and "mood machine" that makes soothing nature sounds, like ocean waves and rain.

"At first, people thought it was a joke," Rubin said, but even those who didn't buy into the concept initially have come to appreciate its merits.

"It is kind of a novelty," he said. "But the response has been great."

Rubin anticipates the room will become increasingly popular among the firm's 30 accountants
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as tax season wears on, but wants to keep its use on a “first-come, first-served” basis. “We try to encourage people not to spend more than 20 or 30 minutes, because if you’re a true power napper, that’s all you really need,” he said.

Rubin says BGR is also “talking about coming up with a more broad-based [health and wellness] program,” possibly including weight loss contests, lunchtime walks and incentives for people to engage in healthy activities. Further, the firm’s office complex has a gym that employees in any of the buildings can use for free.

HCC Rewards Exercise and Wellness Seminars

Howard Community College (HCC) has had a free employee exercise and wellness education program for 14 years, according to Sharon Heckler, HCC’s employee benefits manager.

The exercise program offers yoga, pilates, aerobic weight

training, strength training and aqua-cardio classes at times convenient for employees. For a nominal fee, employees can also take reflexology and “zero balancing,” an alternative therapy similar to massage, integrating Eastern energy concepts and Western science.

The program also includes “brown bag” seminars two or three times a month. Speakers include various health care practitioners, as well as people from the Howard County Health Department, Howard County General Hospital’s Wellness Center and nonprofit organizations like the American Red Cross or American Cancer Society.

Among the incentives the college offers to encourage employee participation is a health-related gift, such as a gym bag. The gift is awarded every year to those who exercise three hours a week and take two hours of wellness education per semester.

This year, HCC is also offering a subsidized on-campus Weight Watchers program, for employees and students who

attend a minimum number of sessions.

Every year, the college has a health fair, providing various screenings and evaluations.

Wellness Center Supports Workplace and Community Health

Howard County General Hospital’s wellness program started in 1985 to provide the community the benefit of good health through prevention, according to Cindi Miller, the hospital’s director of community health education. Now known as the Wellness Center, the program is a resource for businesses providing employee health and wellness programs, as well as the general community.

The Wellness Center supports employee health/wellness programs in various ways, such as providing speakers, health screenings, flu shots and CPR and first aid training.

“We work with the person at the business to see what they’re looking for and provide some-

thing to meet their needs in the time frame they want it,” Miller said.

In addition to working with various non-profit groups to put on programs, Miller said the Wellness Center enjoys “a wonderful partnership” with the Howard County Health Department, in which they work together to optimize their resources.

Other Workplace Health and Wellness Programs

Last April, the county health department launched the six-phase Healthy Howard Initiative. The initiative includes a Healthy Workplaces phase, intended to help businesses assess overall workplace “health” and implement comprehensive wellness programs, among other things.

In addition, for two years, the county chamber of commerce and The Horizon Foundation have sponsored an annual Workplace Wellness competition that awards \$2,500 to the winning small and large business.