



Jordan Shields of Arrow Benefits Group

'presenteeism' and even Workers' Compensation cost reductions, if you reduce workplace injuries caused by aggravating existing medical situations. It's not a strict

correlation, but you can certainly point to a generally positive impact.

"What's overlooked in search of 'cost data' is the qualitative effect wellness can have on your employee community," he continues. According to Shields, when a business shows its employees it cares by offering programs that encourage fitness and wellness, it has a positive impact on employees.

Case in point: One of Arrow's clients implemented a program to promote wellness for its young charges and found that modeling healthy living for children paid off for its employees. (See "A Culture of Health," right.)

### On the horizon

While the nation moves forward with the ACA, there's confusion among employers, numerous details to smooth out and the costs are problematic. "Our clients are confused, frustrated and not seeing the affordability of this act. It's not in their premiums or benefits. It's accessible, but not affordable," says Madson.

As for California's health care exchange—known as Covered California—it's more progressive than other states. "The issue of state exchanges has been widely discussed at the national level," says Keith McNeil. "Covered California is one of the most successful state exchanges, but even Covered California is dealing with possible funding problems due to lower-than-expected enrollment."

Currently, rates for the ACA plans are high—and sometimes alarming.

"One of the best features of the ACA is that more individuals have access to medical coverage, but it's expensive," says Fess. "In time, we hope the rates can be lowered. The main idea is to get more individuals covered by the ACA plans, which, in turn, should help control premium costs. But this will take time."

## A CULTURE OF HEALTH

North Bay Children's Center (NBCC), headquartered in Novato,

has seen positive results by adopting a culture of health. In 2007, NBCC initiated a program called Garden of Eatin' as part of a comprehensive childhood obesity prevention program. As it implemented this program for the young charges in its care, it recognized the need to walk-the-talk and to model what it's teaching.

The curriculum it developed was to help younger children learn about the food they eat, make healthy food choices and enjoy physical activity. "We wanted to help kids make healthy lifestyle choices and understand where food comes from—which isn't a car window," says Teri Clark, educational resource director at NBCC.

At NBCC, children are routinely given lessons on nutrition and the importance of daily physical activity. "We teach the children that there are 'go foods' [almost anytime foods]; 'slow foods' [sometimes foods]; and 'whoa foods' [once in awhile foods]," she adds. "Many NBCC programs serve two of the three meals children eat each day. The meals we serve are healthy and nutritious. We use fresh produce as much as possible."

At lunch, teachers talk to the children about what they're eating and where it comes from. What's more, you won't see staff members popping open a can of soda or munching on a bag of chips.

Parent education is also offered through the program to support families at home with health and wellness. What the children learn at school is reinforced at home thanks to NBCC's partnership with the Redwood Empire Food Bank and the Marin Food Bank, says Clark. What's more, once per week, volunteers pick up produce and kids are able to take it home and share with their families what they're tasting at school.

How's the program working? At first, some parents and staff balked about the policy changes, but they eventually saw the benefits. "Our parents and staff have gotten creative with healthy alternatives to classroom celebrations and on-board with this philosophy, because they realize their children are learning about making healthy changes.

What's more, employees benefit, too. On staff development days, NBCC includes topics on personal wellness. "We've had registered dietitians visit to discuss good nutrition, personal wellness plans and healthy food shopping. We've also had a facilitator speak on skills for managing on-the-job stress and healthy employee communication," says Clark.

Its commitment to health and wellness is a win-win for everyone at NBCC—children, staff and parents. A study by UC San Francisco on NBCC's Garden of Eatin' program concluded that parent and staff's knowledge and attitudes on positive food choices had improved since the program began. (For more information, see the article in the *American Journal of Public Health*, February 2014.)

As for Clark, she's noticed a change among staff. Typically, when teachers work around children all the time, they tend to get sick. But since starting the program, fellow employees seem healthier. In addition, some teachers now take a short walk at lunchtime, join monthly walking groups and support one another in making healthy choices throughout the day. Or, if they want a snack, they step into the garden to pick a plum or some sugar snap peas.

While it's not a formal wellness program as some companies have started in the North Bay, its culture of living works. "It's part of who we are," says Clark. "We care about the wellness of our children, families and staff."

