



## Maryland Businesses Support Worksite Wellness Effort to Combat Chronic Disease



**“We appreciate how The Community Guide and Task Force do the legwork of reviewing the literature and finding which strategies are evidence-based.”**

Maria Prince, MD, MPH  
Chronic Disease Medical  
Director Office of Chronic  
Disease Prevention, Maryland  
Department of Health  
and Mental Hygiene

### More Information

#### **Healthiest Maryland**

[www.health.maryland.gov/healthiest](http://www.health.maryland.gov/healthiest)

#### **Maryland’s Health Quality and Cost Council**

[www.health.maryland.gov/mhqcc/](http://www.health.maryland.gov/mhqcc/)

#### **The Community Guide: CPSTF Findings on Worksite Health Promotion**

[www.thecommunityguide.org/topic/worksite-health](http://www.thecommunityguide.org/topic/worksite-health)

#### **Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, CDC**

[www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao)

Chronic disease is one of the greatest threats to our nation’s health and productivity. Obesity and diabetes are serious chronic conditions that pose wide-reaching, expensive, and preventable health burdens affecting nearly 34 and 11 percent of U.S. adults, respectively. <sup>1,2</sup> In 2010, the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) identified obesity and diabetes as priority areas and launched an initiative to address these conditions by promoting wellness at worksites across the state. Maryland DHMH used findings and recommendations from the Community Preventive Services Task Force (CPSTF) in *The Guide to Community Preventive Services* (*The Community Guide*) as the basis to assess and influence change in employees’ health. A year later, more than 150 businesses committed to workplace wellness options for more than 180,000 employees.

### Obesity and Diabetes Prevention are a Priority

Maryland DHMH recognized the negative impact of chronic disease and tried to find ways to reduce its effect. Through input from state and national health and human resource experts on the Maryland Health Quality and Cost Council (Council), the health department used a prioritization process called “B.I.G.” to identify specific health areas to target. The steps include:

1. Identify high-priority conditions based on clinical, social, and economic **burden**, with attention to health equity
2. Identify potential for **improvability** (e.g., preventable burden of disease; gaps in prevention and care compared to evidence-based standards; relatively low current resource allocation)
3. Apply a “**gut check**” to determine if the priority makes sense given political will and available partnerships

Using this process, the Council chose to focus on obesity and diabetes as issues with a “big” impact on Maryland residents.

### Worksite Wellness is Evidence-Based

“When we were looking for different strategies [to address obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases prevalent in Maryland], we started with evidence-based resources,” says Dr. Maria Prince, chronic disease medical director at DHMH. Council members identified worksite wellness as a key strategy to reach the more than 3 million workers within the state. The Council and its chair, Lt. Governor Anthony Brown, initiated a program called Healthiest Maryland, a movement to create a culture of wellness where the healthiest choice is easy. The first phase of the program, Healthiest Maryland Businesses, focused on worksite-based promotion of healthy lifestyles among employees. Dr. Prince went directly to *The Community Guide* and made use of a variety of the CPSTF’s worksite health and [diabetes recommendations](#), including:

- Assessment of health risks with feedback (AHRF) plus health education with or without other interventions
- Diabetes disease management programs
- Point-of-decision prompts to encourage use of stairs
- Worksite programs to control overweight and obesity



With full support of key stakeholders, Council members and health department staff took the first steps to engage partners and promote worksite health programs focused on reducing obesity and diabetes among Maryland's workforce.

## Healthiest Maryland reaches out to "grasstops leaders"

"In our past worksite wellness efforts," Dr. Prince recalls, "we realized that some of the businesses were struggling because they did not have executive level support for the programs." Healthiest Maryland Businesses' core strategy is to recruit and engage "grasstops leaders"—the executives of Maryland's corporations, small businesses, non-profit organizations, academic institutions, and government organizations.

In addition to a signed letter of commitment stating that the chief executive believes that a healthy, productive workforce is a core part of the business strategy, Healthiest Maryland Businesses asks executives to complete an organizational assessment of health policies and practices, and of the readiness to address changes in the various areas.

Based on these data, Healthiest Maryland Businesses refers employers to organizations that can assist them in developing programs, services, or policies to address employee health risks. For example, technical assistance may include helping employers implement strategies to improve healthy food choices at work, provide access to places for physical activity, or to increase employee access to prevention services. Healthiest Maryland also connects employers with accredited wellness programs, professional organizations, and voluntary health associations that can help educate employees about individual health risks and healthy lifestyles.

## Support for Healthiest Maryland

The first recruitment event for Healthiest Maryland Businesses attracted 40-50 executives to learn about the program's process and gauge their interest. Executives heard about the potential for decreased healthcare costs, increased productivity associated with better employee health, and how that could improve their bottom-line. Within a year, more than 150 businesses, employing more than 180,000 Maryland workers, committed to the Healthiest Maryland initiative.

Dr. Prince hopes to enhance technical assistance offered and possibly award monetary incentives to participating companies. To encourage continued support of the initiative, Healthiest Maryland publicly recognizes participating executives and their companies on their website, at press events, and at training workshops.

According to Dr. Prince, "Healthiest Maryland Businesses is our first focus, and we hope to expand it and to do the same thing in schools and communities. In that way, it would serve as a vehicle for promoting other evidence-based recommendations found in The Community Guide."

## Lessons Learned

- **Use the most up-to-date evidence to inform program decisions.** Dr. Prince regularly visited The Community Guide website for the latest Task Force findings and recommendations, and as a result was able to apply worksite wellness interventions shortly after they were made available.
- **Focus on key decision makers.** The Council appealed directly to executives in various industries and companies to improve commitment to the initiative at all levels of the participating organizations.
- **Gain the the support of leadership by citing credible resources.** The Council referenced trustworthy sources, including The Community Guide, to convince the Lt. Governor to move forward with Healthiest Maryland. In addition, data showing the potential to improve the employer's bottom-line increased program buy-in.




## What is The Community Guide?

The Guide to Community Preventive Services (The Community Guide) is an essential resource for people who want to know what works in public health. It provides evidence-based recommendations about public health interventions and policies to improve health and promote safety.

The Community Preventive Services Task Force (CPSTF)—an independent, nonfederal, unpaid panel of public health and prevention experts—bases its recommendations on systematic reviews of the scientific literature. With oversight from the CPSTF, scientists and subject-matter experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conduct these reviews in collaboration with a wide range of government, academic, policy, and practice-based partners.

[www.thecommunityguide.org](http://www.thecommunityguide.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. U.S. Obesity Trends. [www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/databases.html](http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/databases.html). Accessed on March 21, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Press Release: Number of Americans with Diabetes Rises to Nearly 26 Million. 6 Jan 2011. [www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2011/p0126\\_diabetes.html](http://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2011/p0126_diabetes.html). Accessed on March 21, 2012.