

# Lifeline Center for Wellness & Health Promotion

PSA with Tom Downing

## USM institute connects health and productivity

By MATT WICKENHEISER,  
Portland Press Herald Writer

The University of Southern Maine is starting a new institute to promote wellness programs in businesses as a way to combat the growing health-care crisis.

The "Institute for Workplace Health Promotion" will be a business unit of the college's Lifeline Center for Wellness and Health Promotion, and will feature a pilot program to specifically develop wellness strategies for small businesses. Pilot-program organizers will work with small employers to design a set of best practices and strategies that's reflective of their needs.

Wellness programs take a variety of forms, from providing cash incentives for healthy activities like walking or going to the gym, to on-site health screenings or even practices as simple as having vending machines stocked with juices instead of soda. It's difficult for small businesses to put such programs into place, as owners are often pressed for time, money and resources.

Lifeline is in its 28th year, said director Thomas J. Downing, but it's become clear the center had to take its work to the next level. Lifeline, a nonprofit department at USM, has always provided health/wellness consulting and program management for businesses, municipalities and other groups. But the problem of



Staff photo by Fred J. Field  
Scott Burrill of Portland, an associate at Hannaford, teams up with Wellness Center manager Tara Nau of Springvale as she shows him the finer points of oblique toning using a medicine ball Thursday.



Staff photo by Fred J. Field  
Aerobics instructor Liz Caldwell, left, of South Portland leads an intense cardiovascular workout at Hannaford's employee fitness center in Scarborough. While numerous large Maine employers offer various sorts of wellness programs, small businesses often lack the time or resources for such initiatives.



Staff photo by Fred J. Field  
Thomas Downing of Cape Elizabeth is the director of USM's Lifeline Center.

increasing health-care costs and public-health concerns, such as obesity, is growing to the point where Lifeline is looking to have a broader impact.

Through the new institute, the organization plans to publicly promote wellness programs to businesses as a way to increase productivity and decrease health-care costs.

Attention has been focused on the insurance side of the health-care crisis. The state recently launched its Dirigo program, which is designed to expand access to insurance for Mainers through small businesses. Employers have increased insurance co-pays and implemented high-deductible plans.

But Downing argues that an ounce of prevention may be worth a pound of such cures.

"We need to get over on the health management side of that solution," said Downing. "We've been treating the symptom, not the problem."

Downing said that 75 percent of Mainers die from four chronic diseases: lung disease, cancer, diabetes and heart disease. Development of these diseases is heavily influenced by lifestyles - such as poor nutrition, lack of exercise, smoking and other behaviors. Because people spend so much time at work, programs run by employers can have a real influence on lifestyle choices, he said.

"If we can encourage employees and their families to take better care of themselves, it doesn't mean they won't become sick," Downing said, "but people who lead healthy lifestyles develop less chronic diseases."

Part of the institute's campaign will be to convince businesses that there is a return on investment for spending money on some sort of wellness initiative, that it's not just a nice thing to do for employees. Downing said he's received a verbal agreement with USM's Muskie School of Public Service to work on evaluating and measuring how a business benefits from having a wellness program.

Larger businesses would pay the college for various development and evaluation services. The small-business pilot program would ideally be funded through outside sources, such as grants, but the overall funding plans have yet to be fully developed.

By increasing the amount of return-on-investment data regarding wellness programs in Maine, the programs will become an easier sell to businesses.

Data about wellness programs and their return on investment are largely anecdotal, on a company-by-company basis, said Downing. For instance, Lab Safety Supply of Janesville, Wis., put a program in place that the company says led to a 97 percent decline in lost workdays. Lincoln Plating Co. in

Nebraska estimates that the \$85,000 it spent on a wellness program provided an \$800,000 return on investment over five years in reduced injuries and workers' compensation costs.

The pilot program for small businesses is important for Maine, Downing said, because 97 percent of Maine companies employ 20 people or fewer. While large companies such as Hannaford Bros., Bath Iron Works, Cianbro Corp. and others have strong wellness programs, few small companies have launched their own initiatives.

"These are the employers left out of the loop," said Downing.

Downing said he's spoken with Deborah T. Cook, executive director of the Maine Small Business Alliance, and W. Godfrey Wood, chief executive officer of the Portland Regional Chamber, about the concept. Both have expressed interest in working with the new institute.

"Some of the larger and medium-sized employers around here have embarked on (wellness programs), and have good personnel, economic and cost results to show for it," said Wood.

Wood said the chamber was interested in promoting the program, in a way giving it a stamp of approval.

Cook said she began looking into the preventive side of the health-care crisis when she took the reins of the alliance in December 2003.

"It became pretty clear to me that the wellness programs that corporate organizations have tend not to be as active institutionally with small businesses," said Cook. "Small businesses typically can be innovative and personalize programs based on their industry or geography. If you're up in Kingfield, you can send the staff skiing for the afternoon.

"Sometimes it just comes down to the mindset of the leadership of the organization, and how much they value wellness, but more so how much they can connect having a healthy work force to the level of productivity."

There's little literature on small business and wellness programs, Downing said, but some of the sector's attributes could prove helpful. Small businesses have few layers of management, so decisions can be implemented easily. Communication among the firm's few employees also can be easy.

USM will host a two-hour focus meeting Feb. 22, inviting 100 small companies to the meeting with a letter from college President Richard Pattenade. Attendees will discuss ideas and break into smaller groups.

Some outside funds will be sought to run the pilot, said Downing. At the end, the idea will be to have some product

that small businesses can use to replicate wellness programs - be it a manual, CD-Rom or other system.

The wellness program itself will have to be inexpensive and easy to implement, he said.

Small businesses have been innovative in the past, said Downing. Some have set up walking trails around the area for employees, others have merely stocked snack boxes with fruits and vegetables instead of junk foods. Even a little bit helps, he said.

"One of the barriers is employers don't want to interfere with what they might consider personal decisions of employees," said Cook. "I think that's honorable. At the same time, you can promote an environment of good health and offer information about being healthy that encourages good decisions without crossing that line of prying into someone's personal behavior. If you set standards, if you provide the information and even the access to making the right choices, people will make the right choices."

[Copyright](#) © 2005 Blethen Maine Newspapers Inc.