

Improving Hospital Physical Activity Environments

The CDC supports making the healthy choice the easy choice in every community setting.

As major employers and health leaders, hospitals can help establish strong community norms for promoting healthy and active living through nutritious food and beverage, opportunities for physical activity, support for breastfeeding, and tobacco-free environments. This P2P Series presents case studies of hospitals improving their environment to better support the health of their employees and embody the mission of their organization.

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Learn how Penrose-St. Francis and Fresno VA Medical Center encourage their employees to stay active.

Easy Access to Physical Activity

A formal wellness agenda established in 1985, **Penrose-St. Francis Health Services (PSF)** has one of the longest continually operating programs in the United States. Over the years, PSF has developed a variety of ways to encourage employee physical activity through the STRIVE program; which serves over 2500 employees at multiple locations. Four on-site fitness facilities are available free to all staff and volunteers. Pilates, yoga, boot camp, and spinning are a few of the many exercise classes offered. Some of the classes are taught by the hospital CEO, Margaret Sabin, which sends a message about the importance of physical activity. Organized walking and hiking clubs encourage employees and their families to explore trails throughout Colorado Springs. PSF employees also receive a discounted rate at fitness facilities across the city. To make physical activity even more accessible, a new Wellness on Wheels (WOW) program will take fitness opportunities right to staff on hospital floors. The 5 to 10 minute energizing activity breaks include balance training, stretching and more. "WOW will be offered to our associates who face long 12-hour shifts to alleviate stress, encourage healthy eating and increase stamina" says Kristine Barrette, STRIVE coordinator.

Like many hospital wellness programs, STRIVE faces challenging budget restraints; which leads to limited staffing of the program. Barrett says to help keep initiatives going, "we have to be innovative and attract outstanding wellness interns from across the United States." In addition, volunteers and community partners fill in where needed. Despite challenges, feedback from the employees is positive. The Human Resources Department conducts interviews and many employees say the fitness centers and programs are the best benefit offered at PSF. Barrett lists improved employee morale and better awareness of self care, as some of the benefits of PSF wellness efforts. "It is an exciting time as work sites now understand the impact of wellness: increasing productivity, decreasing sick time and healthcare costs," Barrett says. She advises others to be patient as change takes time and requires culture shifts from all levels.

Key Considerations

- *It can be difficult for hospital staff to leave the floors during their shift; bringing physical activity options to them may increase participation.*
- *Executives taking part in everyday physical activity can set a good example for other employees.*

Painting a Picture of Health

Two years ago, Al Perry, Hospital Director of the **Fresno VA Medical Center**, was informed that the pictures hanging in the main hospital stairwell did not meet the fire code standards and that all the pictures had to be removed. The framed photos depicted VA employees engaging in various physical activities and were meant to promote an active lifestyle and using the stairs instead of the elevator. Perry didn't want fire codes to eliminate that opportunity to promote health, "I believe in the power of physical fitness and we stress that employees have to take care of themselves or they can't take care of their families; if they can't take care of their families, than they can't take care of the Veterans," Perry says. With that in mind, he developed a new plan for the stairwell. His vision was to have murals painted on each landing that would draw people into see realistic, outdoor scene of people engaged in various physical activities throughout California.

To carry out the project, Perry enlisted the help of Jennifer Yahnian, a nurse in the pharmacy department, who he knew was the right person for the job. Yahnian found a very talented local artist, Sheila Boyd, and right away they began working together to develop a concept for the first landing. Painting directly onto the walls required scaffolding, safe electrical resources, and creative problem solving to avoid impeding traffic flow in the stairwell. "I started working with the chiefs of our engineering and safety departments; various issues emerged, but there was a solution to every problem," says Yahnian. Over a 5-month period Perry and Yahnian worked together to develop ideas for all eight landings and Boyd brought their vision to life. Stairwell users could now take a journey through different California elevations, from the sub-basement level cave spelunking scene to kayaking on Lake Tahoe up to a climbing scene at Mount Whitney. In some cases the artist used images of the VA staff doing the activities, so characters in the paintings resemble actual employees. "We wanted the viewer to feel like they were part of the action and the artist was able to pull it off," Perry says. Upon completion, the hospital held a ribbon-cutting celebration and kicked off a month-long employee stair-climbing challenge to help sustain stairwell use. Employees comment on how they are using the stairs more than ever now and getting physically stronger because of it. "They're using it as a weight-loss effort and motivating each other," says Yahnian.

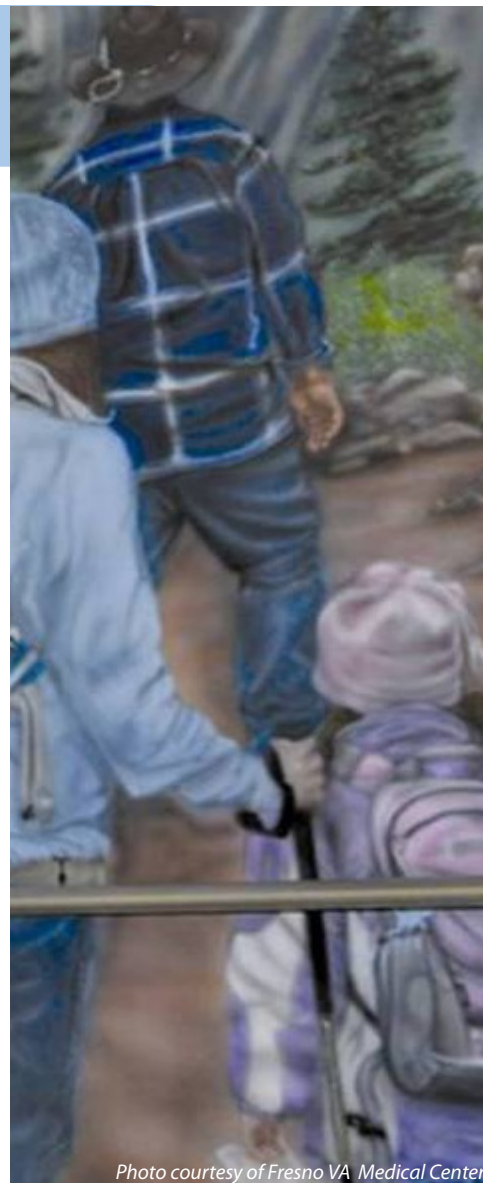


Photo courtesy of Fresno VA Medical Center

Key Considerations

- *Involving facilities staff in the planning phase of a stairwell initiative can alleviate safety concerns during construction.*
- *Continuing to promote stairwell use after an initial campaign is important for sustained behavior change.*

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