



2008 ALBERTA CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE RESOLUTION

Building Healthy Workplaces

Public health care encompasses an increasing proportion of the provincial budget. Real per capita expenditures by Alberta Health and Wellness have increased by nearly 75 per cent in the last 10 years. With ministry allocations increasing by 12 per cent in 2007/08 alone, health care now comprises 37 per cent of the provincial budget (\$10.3 billion).

Unhealthy individual choices can have long-term impacts that increase provincial health care costs. The Alberta Chambers of Commerce (ACC) supports the principle that individuals must take more responsibility for their own health to help reduce pressures on the provincial health care system. However, ACC also recognizes that fostering healthy lifestyles requires the participation and support of both business and government to promote and build healthy workplaces.

Benefits of Healthy Workplaces

A key component to fostering healthy lifestyles involves fostering health in the work environment. According to Health Canada, workplace health programs are those designed to help employees maintain or improve their health.” These can include leadership programs, workplace safety, and access to fitness centres, reducing organizational stress, employee benefits and employee assistance programs.

In the past few years, researchers have amassed an impressive series of studies demonstrating the economic benefits of healthy workplace programs:

- Canada Life in Toronto found that each corporate dollar invested in healthy workplaces returns \$3.40 in terms of reduced turnover, productivity gains and decreased medical claims.
- The University of Toronto found that corporate wellness programs return a cumulative economic benefit of \$500 to \$700 per worker per year.
- BC Hydro found that employees enrolled in a work-sponsored fitness program had a turnover rate of 3.5 per cent compared with the company average of 10.3 per cent.
- The Canadian Life Assurance Company found that the turnover rate for fitness program participants was 32.4-per-cent lower than the average over a seven-year period.
- Toronto Life Assurance found that employee turnover for those enrolled in the company’s fitness program was 1.5 per cent versus 15 per cent for non-participants.



ACC believes the implementation and adoption of healthy workplace policies will help to:

- Promote and foster healthy individual choices within large segments of the population that will combat rising provincial and federal health care costs.
- Ensure a competitive environment for business through enhanced employee productivity.
- Improve the recruitment and retention of skilled labour in Alberta.

Barriers to healthy workplace program adoption

In 2004 the Calgary Chamber of Commerce interviewed 22 organizations of various sizes and sectors employing over 70,000 individuals in the Calgary area. According to the survey, many businesses do not adopt effective healthy workplace practices due to the following: a lack of active support by company owners and senior management; the perception that costs exceed the benefits; and a lack of available resources to implement effective practices. ACC interprets the responses as an indication that businesses are not convinced or aware of the benefits of healthy work environments.

Role for Government

According to the Alberta government's September 2006 report Alberta's 10 year Strategy: Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce,

"Government has an important role to play in creating high-performance work environments. High-performance work environments mean, among others, healthy, safe and fair working conditions, more flexible work arrangements benefiting both the worker and employer and increasing the share of effective and promising practices among employers. The government can employ a number of legislative and financial levers to encourage healthy, fair and safe workplaces..."

The report highlights the importance not only of good jobs but also of good workplaces, living spaces and communities to Alberta's success in attracting and retaining workers. The promotion of workplace wellness, and the subsequent adoption by employers, works towards improving the health of all Albertans, a key recommendation of the Mazankowski report, and provides an opportunity to decrease costs associated with health care.

Government has recognized the linkage between workplace health and a healthy population. In 2003 Alberta Health and Wellness launched the Healthy U at Work website and, in 2005, the Premier's Award for Healthy Workplaces. ACC supports government's efforts to promote healthy workplaces through these initiatives but also recognizes the need to work with business to develop integrated strategies and a clear vision to continually advance and promote workplace wellness initiatives.



The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Alberta:

1. Continue to promote and recognize healthy workplace practices through competitive awards.
2. Develop and support initiatives and educational programs that promote to the business community the economic and health benefits of developing and implementing workplace health initiatives.
3. Prioritize research within the budgetary parameters of Alberta Health and Wellness and Alberta Employment and Immigration, and broadly communicate findings relating to the macro-economic benefits and reductions to provincial health care costs of healthy workplace practices.