



Why Healthy Communities Matter to Businesses

Data Reveals Linkages Between Health, Education, and Job Preparedness



Photo: Melissa Golden

County Health Rankings: From Data to Action

When regional businesses and employers invest in the health—and therefore economic vitality—of the communities they call home, they see benefits to the bottom line and to the regional economy. This issue brief—developed by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in partnership with the *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps*—highlights why businesses should care about the health of their communities, outlines ways employers can get involved with community health improvement, and offers local examples of success.

Key Takeaways—Healthier Communities Mean...

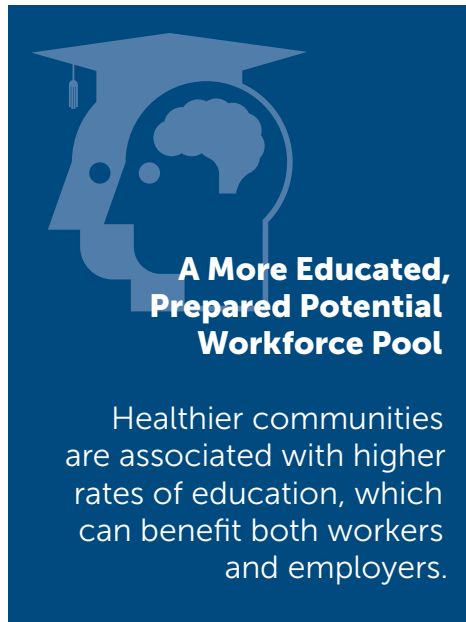
Healthier Employees

Healthier communities help to cultivate a healthy, more productive workforce fueling future economic growth.



A More Educated, Prepared Potential Workforce Pool

Healthier communities are associated with higher rates of education, which can benefit both workers and employers.



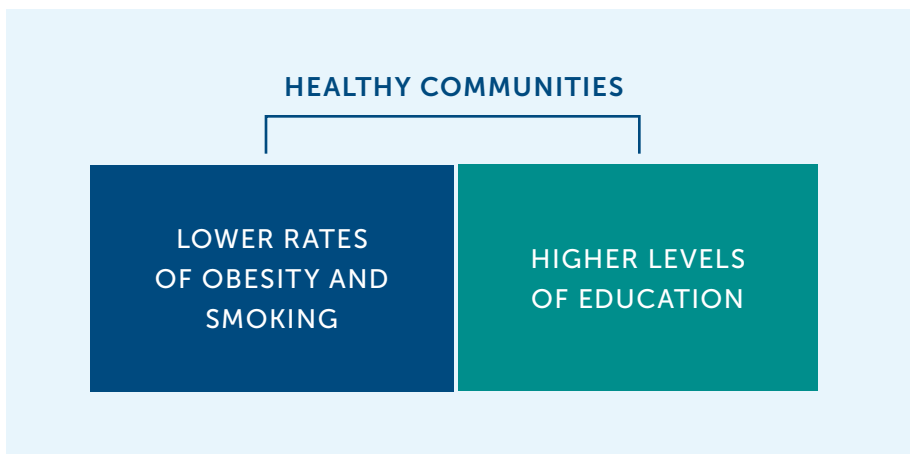
A Stronger Local Economy

Healthier communities attract more talented employees and a healthier customer base, which can strengthen their economies.



Overview

The health of a community greatly affects its economic competitiveness. Productivity losses as a result of employees who don't come to work or work while sick cost U.S. employers over \$225 billion annually.¹ In addition to better physical and mental health, healthy communities are associated with lower rates of obesity and smoking and higher levels of education. All of these factors contribute to a healthier, more productive workforce that misses fewer days of work and drives lower health care expenditures.



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Opportunities for Health Within a Community Help Cultivate a Healthier, More Productive Workforce

Research points to a link between an unhealthy workforce and unhealthy communities.² Even when an employer implements health-promoting strategies at the worksite, if employees then go home to unhealthy neighborhoods, the workplace progress is compromised. Improved community conditions for health, such as clean air laws, access to an abundance of healthy food options, clean and safe neighborhoods, and opportunities for exercise and physical activity, can help positively influence health behaviors and lead to a more productive workforce. Conversely, habits like cigarette smoking, nutritionally poor food intake, and insufficient exercise contribute to chronic health conditions that impact worker productivity and employer spending.³

Healthier Communities Have Higher Rates of Education

On average, residents of the top 10 percent of (Healthiest⁴) counties in each state have higher high school graduation rates and more training beyond high school than the bottom 10 percent (Unhealthiest). In addition to improved employment and economic opportunities,⁵ higher levels of education can lead to a greater sense of control over one's life, which is linked to better health, healthier lifestyle decisions, and fewer chronic conditions,⁶ all of which offer advantages to both employees and employers.

Healthier Communities Mean a Stronger Local Economy

Investing in and supporting healthy communities can have a positive impact on businesses' bottom line. When businesses are located in healthy communities and/or if they are active in working with others or funding initiatives to improve the community's health, the characteristics associated with healthy communities can benefit their image and reputation. This can potentially lead to growth in their customer base and prospective pool of talented employees.⁷ Healthier communities are also home to healthier customers who have fewer medical expenses and more discretionary income to spend on goods and services.⁸

HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES



Business and Communities are Working Together to Invest in Education, Job Training, and Workplace Wellness

Around the country, employers and communities are recognizing the importance of proactively supporting a more skilled, prepared, and healthier workforce. They are finding ways to collaborate on investments in education, job training, and wellness programs. Below are some examples:

Business Leaders Partner With Public and Nonprofit Sectors to Improve Student Performance

Spokane County, Wash.: County leaders—including school officials, local universities, employers, and other partners—developed a series of steps to improve education outcomes including full-day kindergarten; skill-building training for young students; a real-time system to monitor student attendance, behaviors, and grades; and support for a targeted dropout prevention program designed to empower young people. As they improve student performance and graduation rates, they are partnering with business to create a stronger pipeline to better jobs.



Spokane County, Wash.

Local Chamber of Commerce Leads Efforts to Create a Regional Culture of Wellness

Greater Kansas City, Mo.: Healthy KC—a partnership of the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, Blue Cross and Blue Shield, and a number of regional business leaders—influences policies that foster a Culture of Health. Healthy KC's Workplace Wellness Action Team created a certification program that recognizes area organizations for innovation and excellence in promoting a Culture of Health in the workplace. Certification is based on four "pillars" of health: nutrition, physical activity, tobacco cessation, and work/life integration.



Greater Kansas City, Mo.

Local Employers Break Down Barriers to Steady, Productive Employment for Workers

Chittenden, Vt.: Prioritizing job training and professional skill development will help people get better jobs. In Chittenden, a multisector network of employers, in partnership with the United Way of Northwest Vermont, are working to reduce employment barriers for low-to-moderate wage workers through a variety of means, including onsite GED, English Language Learning, and financial literacy classes.

Area Chamber of Commerce Leads Community-Wide Initiative to Make the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice

Iowa City Area, Iowa: Through the Blue Zones Project™ a collaborative, community-wide well-being initiative, the Iowa City Area Chamber of Commerce is leading efforts to collect pledges from a variety of community sectors (worksite, school, restaurant, grocery store) in order to achieve critical milestones that make their town a better place to live, work, and play.



Chittenden, Vt.



Iowa City, Iowa



Potential Solutions: Policies That Businesses and Communities Can Implement to Improve Workforce Preparedness and Employee and Resident Health

The needs and capabilities of communities and local businesses differ. Below is a sampling of evidence-informed policies and programs that employers can implement in collaboration with other local leaders to further the health and education of their employees and the larger community.

- **Dropout prevention programs**—Dropout prevention programs can increase high school graduation through remedial education, vocational training, and other assistance to help students complete high school. Such programs may target at-risk students or an entire school.
- **Vocational training for adults**—Vocational training supports acquisition of job-specific skills through education, certification programs, or on-the-job training.
- **Smoke-free policies: indoor areas**—Smoke-free policies include private sector rules and public sector regulations that prohibit smoking or restrict it to designated areas. Private sector policies may ban smoking on worksite property or restrict it to designated outdoor locations.
- **Worksite obesity prevention interventions**—Worksite nutrition and physical activity programs use educational, environmental, and behavioral strategies to improve health-related behaviors and health outcomes.
- **Paid sick leave**—Paid sick leave provides paid time off to employees for use when ill or injured. Sick employees may use the time to see a physician or stay home until they are healthy enough to work again, without concern for lost wages.

For a more customized approach, employers can visit countyhealthrankings.org to review their counties' health data, explore policies and programs that would best serve their workers and residents, and find ideas for how to implement these strategies.



Photo: Samantha Appleton

Tulsa, Okla.

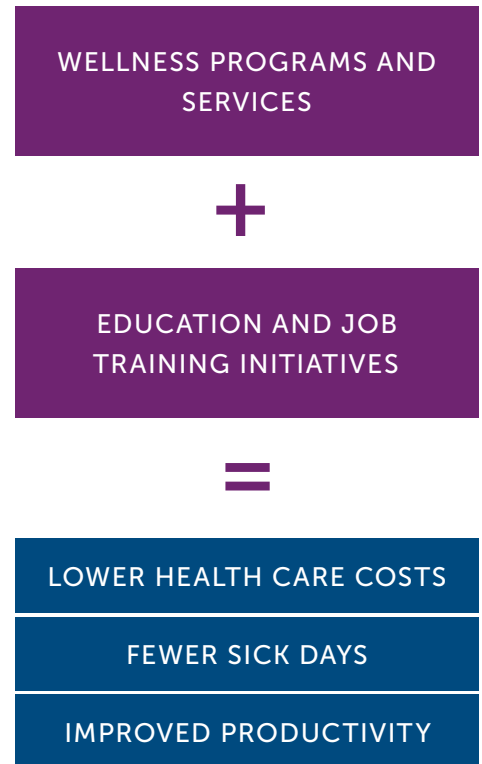
Conclusion

Good health is good for business. When employers invest in their employees and their families by offering wellness programs and services, and supporting education and job training initiatives, there are lower health care costs, fewer sick days, and improved productivity. When communities are healthier, employer health care costs are reduced, which enables more economic growth, and everyone in the community is better off. Places across the country are recognizing that health is the bedrock of personal fulfillment, the backbone of prosperity, and the foundation for a strong, competitive nation.

To learn more visit www.countyhealthrankings.org.

Additional Resources

The Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) is providing resources and technical assistance to chambers across the country to support them in advancing a health and wellness agenda in their communities. To learn more about how the business community can support efforts to build a Culture of Health, visit acce.org/ead or contact Analidia Blakely, ACCE Education Attainment Division Manager, via email at ablakely@acce.org.



Endnotes

- 1 Stewart WF, Ricci JA, Chee E, Morganstein D. Lost productive work time costs from health conditions in the United States: Results from the American Productivity Audit. *J Occup Environ Med*. 2003;45(12):1234-1246.)
- 2 Oziransky V, Yach D, Tsu-Yu T, Luterek A, ad Stevens D. *Beyond the Four Walls: Why Community is Critical to Workforce Health*. Vitality Institute; 2015.
- 3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Smoking & Tobacco Use*. Last reviewed February 14, 2014. Accessed March 3, 2014.
- 4 University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps 2015 Key Findings Report*. www.countyhealthrankings.org
- 5 Egerter S, Braveman P, Sadegh-Nobari T, Grossman-Kahn R, Dekker M. *Education Matters for Health; Issue Brief 6*. Princeton, NJ: RWJF Commission to Build a Healthier America; 2009.
- 6 Egerter S, Braveman P, Sadegh-Nobari T, Grossman-Kahn R, Dekker M. *Education and Health. Exploring the Social Determinants of Health Issue Brief No. 5*. Princeton: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; 2011.
- 7 Webber A and Mercure S. Improving population health: The business community imperative. *Prev Chronic Dis* 2010;7(6):A121. www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2010/nov/10_0086.htm.
- 8 LaMontagne C. NerdWallet Health finds medical bankruptcy accounts for majority of personal bankruptcies. NerdWallet.com. www.nerdwallet.com/blog/health/medical-bankruptcy/. Published March 26, 2014. Retrieved July 18, 2015.