

# Hoping to pay now to save later, city expands wellness program

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By Matt Galnor

Jacksonville is taking another run at paying for city employees to get in shape with personal trainers, saying it's willing to pay a little more now to save millions in insurance costs later.

This time, employees from all city departments are eligible and participants must get a doctor's confirmation of one of eight targeted symptoms, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol and morbid obesity.

The city will use \$150,000 its insurance carrier sets aside for wellness programs and, beginning Oct. 1, will kick in \$350,000 a year for the three-year contract.

The city's share is less than half of one percent of the \$56.2 million it'll receive this year in insurance premiums, said Chad Poppell, the city's human resources director. Projections showed a 20 percent increase in premiums for the budget year starting Oct. 1 - an \$11 million increase.

The new programs come less than a year after the city chose not to renew a similar contract aimed at police officers and firefighters. Few firefighters took part and the plan was opened up to more workers. A Times-Union analysis found secretaries, auditors and the risk manager who started the program were signed up.

Millie Reeves, the city's senior manager of personnel services, has long advocated for a wellness program. She's been with the city more than 30 years and says the city always backs away from such programs, fearing criticism for what could sound to some like a frivolous service.

## **It's not a 'free ride'**

"This is not a free ride," Reeves said. "This is something that sick employees, and only sick employees, are going to get the opportunity to participate in."

The city will start promoting it to its employees this week so they can start going to the doctor to get proof of health issues.

The program, which starts July 1, includes three workouts a week for eight weeks and cannot be done on the clock. Reports on each employees are sent to the city weekly to monitor progress and attendance.

If a worker is either late or skips three workouts, the employee is kicked out of the program and will have to pay the city back. Exact figures are still being worked out as the contract is being finalized, but Reeves said there's enough money for 400 to 500 employees a year.

If employees come in with serious health issues, they could be extended another eight weeks. After that, employees can sign up on their own at a reduced rate.

The only firm seeking the contract was the High Intensity Training Center on the Southside, the same company the city used last year.

### **Program has its critics**

HIT Center will also use Heartland Rehabilitation Services, which has locations across the city, to make it more convenient for city workers to attend.

But there are critics. When the city is laying off workers and slashing library hours, it's not the right time to pay for employees to get in shape, said John Winkler, former president of Concerned Taxpayers of Duval County.

Poppell, however, said the investment in employee health will be well worth it.

The \$150,000 from Aetna, the city's insurance provider, has been used in the past for "lunch and learn" workshops and a free health fair, Reeves said. The previous work with HIT Center got several employees off cholesterol and blood pressure medication, and Reeves said the \$150,000 is better spent on the workout program.

"In the long run," Reeves said, "we think this is a benefit to taxpayers."

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