

## Participating in the CDC's National Healthy Worksite Program

### Getting Started

Midland Empire for Independent Living (MERIL) applied to the National Healthy Worksite Program (NHWP) hoping it would provide guidance to implement something they had talked about for a long time. Deann Young, Executive Administrator to MERIL's CEO, and Maria Brandt, one of MERIL's independent living specialists, championed MERIL's health promotion efforts and were supported by a wellness committee representing a broad spectrum of the organization's employees.

### Completing a Baseline Assessment

One of the first NHWP activities to be completed was a baseline assessment in 2013. The NHWP assessments included employee health surveys covering health conditions, healthy behaviors, and perceptions about the work environment and on-site biometric screenings. Like all of the employers participating in the NHWP, MERIL also completed the *CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard*, a validated organizational tool designed to help employers assess the extent to which they have implemented evidence-based health promotion interventions.

### Setting Goals Based on Health ScoreCard Findings

After receiving the results of the 2013 assessments, MERIL's wellness committee set goals for the following:

- reducing the percentage of employees with high blood pressure
- increasing fruit and vegetable intake
- increasing employees' levels of physical activity.

The committee also realized that stress was a concern.

With leadership support, the committee branded its program, "MERIL Wellness 4U." Because more than half of MERIL's employees have a disability, the wellness committee had to find activities that allowed all employees to participate in a way that meets their needs. Young and Brandt participated in all CDC trainings and webinars. The training content and program resources equipped them to select appropriate wellness interventions and tailor them to meet the needs of MERIL's workforce. Young and Brandt also made time in their own schedules to share their updates and progress, as well as to seek out advice from CDC staff during monthly technical assistance calls.

## Organization Background

Midland Empire Resources for  
Independent Living

- « Established in 1994
- « Non-profit healthcare and social assistance organization
- « Location: St. Joseph, Missouri
- « 50 Employees

Midland Empire for Independent Living (MERIL) is a community-based, nonresidential program serving nine counties in Northwest Missouri. MERIL was designed to empower people with disabilities to actively and independently participate in society. MERIL provides a range of independent living services, including training; community education and advocacy; support groups; transition from nursing home care; home nurse visits; deaf, hard of hearing, blind and low vision services and resources. More than half of MERIL's employees have a disability, and they describe their organization as "people with disabilities offering solutions to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities and people who are aging."

Though employees at MERIL are busy providing services to eliminate barriers for others in the community, they find time to support each other at work and enjoy friendly competition with co-workers.

## Program Overview

### Focus on Healthy Eating

The wellness committee incorporated educational and activity-based programs to address its goals to improve employees' eating habits. The committee organized quarterly themed potluck lunches and e-mailed a weekly healthy recipe to all staff. They had taste-testing events to encourage employees to try healthy new foods and served healthy homemade snacks at staff meetings.



The committee capitalized on the employees' competitive spirit and held healthy challenges, including a fruit and vegetable challenge and a summer hydration

challenge with frozen treats and healthy drinks provided by the wellness committee. To reward the challenge winners, participating employees each chipped in a small amount of money and the wellness committee contributed up to \$25 in matching funds.

### Wellness Committee Role

During challenges, the wellness committee sent out friendly notices to employees reminding them to track their activities or progress and to encourage them. MERIL's 12-week point challenge, in which employees accumulated points for healthy eating, physical activity, and sleep and received small incentives at milestones along the way, had about 33% of the staff participating.

### Using Outside Resources

To encourage employees to think about health each day, the committee started sending out daily wellness tips they got from the Cleveland Clinic. MERIL hosted an educational lunch-and-learn series sometimes bringing in outside speakers. Speakers presented information about stress, decision making, and ways to involve family members in health behavior change.

The committee worked to increase employees' physical activity by turning it into challenges and hosting informational sessions about stretching and exercise. The committee put a Wii game console in a conference room to encourage indoor physical

activity, provided pedometers to some employees, and recommended mobile applications for tracking activities. They had an annual "MERIL Fun Day" with a focus on physical activities during the work day and organized an employee team to participate in the American Heart Walk, a wheelchair and family-friendly event.

### Growing Their Own

One highlight of MERIL's 2014 efforts was an employee-maintained vegetable garden, which provided healthy produce, physical activity, stress relief, and opportunities to talk about incorporating herbs and vegetables in recipes. MERIL intends to make the garden wheelchair accessible in 2015.

MERIL's Wellness 4U program tapped into their supportive organizational culture by building in opportunities to recognize employees making healthy changes and providing forums for employees to share their own challenges and solutions.

### Leadership Counts

MERIL leaders encourage employees to support each other and wrapped up 2014 with an employee appreciation lunch where staff exchanged personal notes about what they appreciate about each other. Employee perceptions of strong social support were reflected in MERIL's 2015 NHWP assessment results. In 2015, 95% of employees agreed that MERIL management considers workplace health and safety to be important, up from 87% in 2013. The percentage who agreed that their supervisor encourages healthy behaviors increased from 60% in 2013 to 79% in 2015.

### Raising Awareness

The committee identified different national health events to highlight and encouraged staff to show their support. In March, staff were invited to wear green to recognize National Cerebral Palsy Month and National Kidney Awareness Month. In February 2015 MERIL staff chose a day to wear red in honor of American Heart Month. These activities have contributed to a high overall awareness of health and well-being and of the opportunities made available through the Wellness 4U program. Eighty-six percent of employees agreed that they were aware that MERIL offered a worksite health program.



Employee participants in MERIL's workplace wellness program.

Photo provided by MERIL.

The wellness committee applied content from the NHWP training and technical assistance that focused on data collection and assessment to inform program planning and decision making.

### Getting Feedback

In early 2015, the wellness committee organized focus groups with employees to gather their input about what components of the wellness program they liked and what else they wanted in the program. Most employees participated. Their feedback indicated that they liked the tips, recipes, and other encouraging e-mails they receive from the wellness committee. In 2015, 72% of employees agreed that their organization encourages them to make suggestions about health and safety.

### Program Success

The wellness committee completed all of the activities in its initial health improvement work plan and implemented an impressive variety of initiatives that helped keep employees engaged. MERIL's 2015 results on the *CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard* showed dramatic improvement from where they started in 2013. MERIL's score in 2015 was 220 out of a possible 264 points, 2.5 times higher than its score in 2013. MERIL's Health ScoreCard indicates that they have implemented evidence-based interventions and increased their scores in their target areas of high blood pressure, nutrition, physical activity, stress management, as



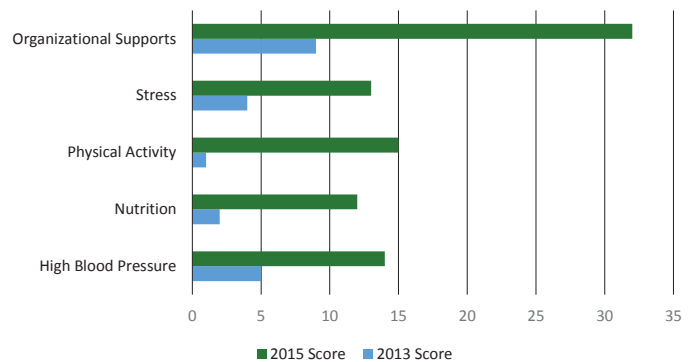
well as across the other ScoreCard modules. Some examples of the evidence-based strategies MERIL received points for in its 2015 ScoreCard that it did not have in place in 2013 that include the following:

- Providing lifestyle management programs for blood pressure control.
- Making blood pressure monitoring devices and instructions available for employee use.
- Making most of the food and beverage choices sold at the worksite healthy items.
- Providing environmental supports for exercise.
- Providing organized physical activity programs for employees.
- Providing work-life balance programs to help address stress.

### Support Makes a Difference

MERIL more than tripled its score in the Organizational Supports module that assesses the extent to which organizations have a foundation in place to support and maintain a health promotion

CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard Overall Score in Wellness Programming 2013-2015



program. Notably, MERIL's 2015 ScoreCard indicated that its program now has champions, an annual budget, and it is integrated in annual organizational objectives.

2013 Employee Health Issues and Lifestyle Risks Profile (Employees=15)	
<b>Self-Reported Health Assessment Survey</b>	
Health care provider diagnosed high blood pressure	40%
Eat at least 5 daily servings of fruits and vegetables	0%
Engage in little or no physical activity	87%
Neck/shoulder/arm/hand pain	40%
High stress	33%
<b>Biometric Screening</b>	
Obesity (Body Mass Index > 30)	67%
Pre-hypertension (systolic 120-139 mmHg or diastolic 80-89 mmHg)	60%
Elevated blood pressure (systolic $\geq$ 140 mmHg or diastolic $\geq$ 90 mmHg)	0%

2015 Employee Health Issues and Lifestyle Risks Profile (Employees=44)*	
<b>Self-Reported Health Assessment Survey</b>	
Health care provider diagnosed high blood pressure	23%
Eat at least 5 daily servings of fruits and vegetables	14%
Engage in little or no physical activity	52%
Neck/shoulder/arm/hand pain	30%
High stress	50%
<b>Biometric Screening</b>	
Obesity (Body Mass Index > 30)	46%
Pre-hypertension (systolic 120-139 mmHg or diastolic 80-89 mmHg)	36%
Elevated blood pressure (systolic $\geq$ 140 mmHg or diastolic $\geq$ 90 mmHg)	21%
<i>*Percentages include all employees who provided data in 2015, including those who did not complete the 2013 assessments.</i>	

## Increasing Participation

In 2013, 15 employees completed the health assessments. In 2015, 44 of the organization's 50 employees completed the assessments, including 13 of the original 15 who were assessed in 2013. This large increase in employee participation is a testament to the wellness committee's success in elevating employee health as a priority at MERIL.

The tables below summarize the assessment data that the wellness committee focused its efforts on.

- The committee's efforts to reduce high blood pressure through dietary changes, physical activity and monitoring may be helping to move employees from the hypertension range down to the pre-hypertension range.
- More employees reported eating the recommended daily amounts of fruits and vegetables in 2015 than in 2013.
- Compared to 2013, a larger percentage of employees reported engaging in some form of exercise in 2015. Although the committee did not have a weight loss objective, the percentage of employees considered obese in 2013 dropped in 2015, possibly a positive by-product of the increased physical activity and improved nutrition.
- A smaller percentage of employees also reported experiencing neck, shoulder, arm, or hand pain in 2015, another potential positive by-product of exercise.
- A larger percentage of employees reported experiencing high levels of stress in 2015 compared to 2013. Although the committee hoped to reduce stress levels, organizational changes may have led to even larger increases in stress levels without the committee's efforts..

***“Co-worker support and encouragement is key. When you don’t feel like doing it and someone says, ‘oh come on,’ it’s motivating!”***

*– Deann Young, Executive Administrator to MERIL CEO*

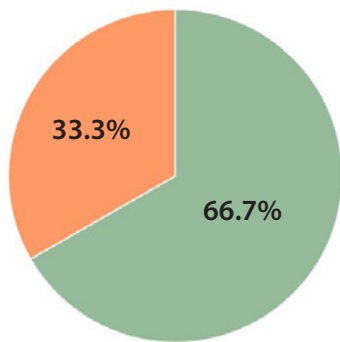
As a group, the 13 employees who participated in both the 2013 and the 2015 assessments made positive behavior changes. The percentage of employees who engage in little or no exercise decreased from 69% to 54%, and employees who eat five daily servings of fruits and vegetables increased from zero 0% to 23%. This group increased the average number of times they ate fruit each week from 4.6 times per week in 2013 times 11.6 times per week in 2015. The percentage of these employees who were obese in 2013 decreased from 69% to 54% in 2015.

For employees who have been diagnosed with high blood pressure, keeping those levels in a healthy

range usually involves lifestyle changes and taking medication. Increasing the number of employees with hypertension who comply with their doctor’s instructions to be treated with medication increases the number of employees with their blood pressure under control, reducing the risk of health problems and complications from this condition.

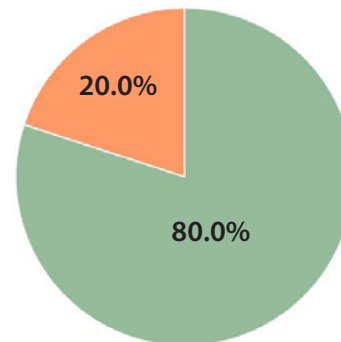
In 2013, two-thirds of MERIL employees who responded that they had been told they have high blood pressure by a health care provider reported that they were currently taking high blood pressure medication. In 2015, the percentage of employees taking medication for high blood pressure increased to 80 percent

**Percentage of employees treating diagnosed high blood pressure with medication in 2013**



- Diagnosed and currently taking high blood pressure medication
- Diagnosed and not currently taking medications

**Percentage of employees treating diagnosed high blood pressure with medication in 2015**



- Diagnosed and currently taking high blood pressure medication
- Diagnosed and not currently taking medications

In May 2015, MERIL closed its office for a day to host a health exposition called “Better Living for You,” featuring 60 vendors. The free event was open to MERIL employees and the community, and highlighted MERIL’s culture of health for their own employees and for others to share. Young is involved in her Chamber of Commerce and is especially interested in sharing lessons learned about improving health in their communities.

The wellness committee considers short-term challenges with incentives a hallmark of its program and it has spent less than \$100 on each one. Staff participation has grown as employees see their coworkers taking part and enjoying the challenges. Young said, “Coworker support and encouragement is key. When you don’t feel like doing it and someone says, ‘oh come on,’ it’s motivating!” MERIL’s leadership team participates in challenges and encourage others to participate. Employees can see their leaders making healthy choices too.

The wellness committee at MERIL has continued to find creative, low cost ways to inspire employees to make healthier choices. It has had mixed success in using incentives donated by local businesses, both in terms of their appeal to employees and MERIL's limitations on donations it can accept for its own employees. The committee has found that recognition is a more effective incentive for MERIL employees. Young said that certificates for specific activities are popular with employees, even if they are just for participating in a program or challenge.

As program leads and champions, Young and Brandt have maintained a high level of engagement, enthusiasm, and dedication to growing MERIL's program and have shown that all of the smaller low cost changes can snowball to have a larger effect.

MERIL's committee has established organization-level supports and built internal capacity that will help them maintain and build upon their positive changes. Best of all, some at MERIL are seeing and hearing signs that a culture of health is taking hold, and being used with employees and their families

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## Challenges

MERIL had some organizational changes in 2014 when it acquired a home health agency, and this created some additional stress for employees. The wellness committee saw this as a call to increase its focus on stress management.

MERIL's wellness committee has had to balance the benefits of being inclusive of a range of committee members' perspectives with the challenge of making timely decisions and taking action. During the committee's initial year, it sought some advice from its CDC technical advisor on keeping the program on course, and some early successes and positive employee feedback have made the committee more confident.

One of MERIL's unique challenges is finding activities in which all of its employees are able to participate. The organization remained true to MERIL's vision of a barrier-free Northwest Missouri with regard to its employees' health and wellness, and has offered a variety of programs and environmental supports. For example, the game console available to employees on-site includes physical activities that primarily use the arms and can be performed by employees who use wheelchairs. All employees were able to participate in hydration and healthy eating challenges. The positive employee satisfaction ratings about the program provided solid evidence that the committee succeeded.

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## What's Next?

MERIL intends to keep their wellness program dynamic and focused on employee needs. Specifically it plans to do the following:

- Add staffing resources to help take care of administrative duties for the wellness program.
- Organize lunch-and-learn sessions focused communication styles and on some of the root causes of stress MERIL employees experience.
- Modify the employee garden to include raised beds that can be tended by employees who use wheelchairs.
- Identify and promote more "sit and be fit" physical activity programs to encourage participation from employees at all ability and mobility levels.
- Offer on-site beginner-level exercise demonstrations, with options and modifications for employees with mobility limitations.



*The National Healthy Worksite Program was designed to help employers put into action science- and practice-based disease-prevention and wellness strategies that would lead to specific measurable health outcomes to reduce chronic disease rates. From 2013-2015, each participating employer received support, training, and technical assistance to put in place a combination of program, policy, and environmental interventions to support physical activity, good nutrition, and tobacco-use cessation.*