

**GUNDERSEN**  
**HEALTH SYSTEM®**

# A CASE FOR COLLABORATION

*How a Health System Brought People  
Together to Achieve Higher Engagement*

## AUTHORS

Cindy Kartman, B.S., MScA • Business Intelligence Specialist, Office of Population Health  
Carrie Zimmerman, B.S., CHES • Wellness Education Specialist, Office of Population Health  
Jessica Boland, B.S., MPH • Worksite Wellness Consultant, Office of Population Health

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## Introduction

Gundersen Health System (GHS) has cared for patients and the communities they serve for more than 125 years. In the face of a rapidly changing landscape, Gundersen launched a new strategic plan in 2017 that built on the organization's legacy of excellent care and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's Triple Aim framework:

- » Improve the health of the population
- » Offer outstanding patient experience
- » Ease the financial burden of healthcare

At the center of this plan is the organization's purpose: *Enrich Every Life*. This includes patients, families and staff. Gundersen believes employees are its most important resources. When employees are as healthy as they can be, they will deliver better care to patients, better care to each other and better care to themselves, their family, and community.

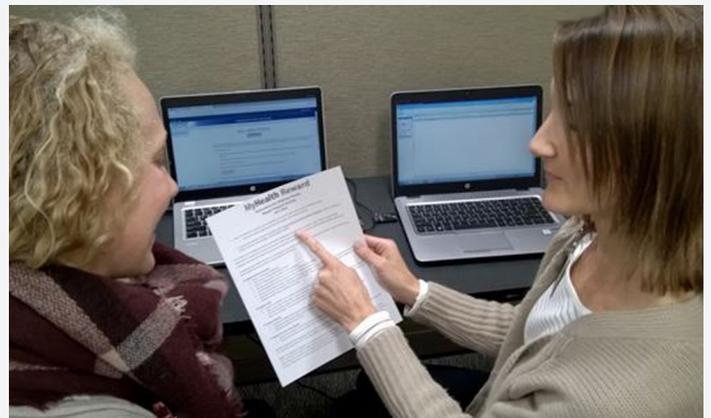


Gundersen Health System's vision is to enhance the health and well-being of our communities, while enriching every life we touch, including patients, families, and staff. Our employee wellness strategy aims to fulfill this vision by improving the health, safety and lifestyle of its employees and to support the health of the organization through increased engagement and productivity, reduced absenteeism, and reduced claims costs. In 2018, Gundersen Health System was honored to receive the Platinum Well Workplace Award.

## Methods

Employee wellness has been a defined priority at Gundersen Health System since 1997 and in 2005 was branded under the *MyHealth* label. As *MyHealth* implies, it is the employee who is responsible and accountable for his or her own health and wellbeing. However, it is Gundersen's goal to offer the tools, resources, and support for the employee in his/her efforts to achieve and maintain health.

Although Gundersen has a very high participation rate in wellness programming overall, some employees remain more difficult to engage. These include healthcare providers, registered nurses and staff in high-turnover departments such as environmental services and laundry. Some employees who provide direct care find it difficult to find time to be away from patients and thus have lower participation in wellness programming. Another challenge is to provide wellness programming to employees across three states, as each regional location has different access to wellness resources. In addition to hosting screenings on the main campus, Office of Population Health (OPH) staff travel to each regional location to conduct screenings. This increases engagement and participation for the program. The wellness portal is another way Gundersen engages employees in wellness. This custom online portal houses all OPH wellness programs and challenges.



*MyHealth Screening*



## COLLABORATION IN SUPPORT OF WELLNESS: WELL WORKPLACE BENCHMARK 2

The Office of Population Health, which oversees the wellness strategy, believes a comprehensive approach is key to delivering appropriate employee wellness programming and moving the needle on high level strategic goals. This includes building strong partnerships with other GHS departments and employees across the system. OPH coordinates and relies on two system-wide committees - the Integrated Health and Productivity Management (IHPM) committee and the wellness committee. As stated in the WELCOA Well Workplace Benchmark 2, this collaboration engage stakeholders at all levels and helps maintain a cooperative approach to the organization's worksite wellness strategy and initiatives.

The IHPM committee was officially formed in 2005. Key stakeholders from across the health system with related strategic goals are invited to be members. While membership evolves over time as staff and roles change, current membership includes employees from Safety, Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Employee Health, Payroll and Benefits, Corporate Communications, Women's Health and the Healthy Living Center (a Gundersen-YMCA partnership for certain patient populations). The committee meets regularly to encourage open communication, nurture collaboration and alignment of work, and monitor shared metrics. In addition, Gundersen's wellness committee is composed of wellness champions across its system, region wide. Committee members serve as a liaison between employees and the wellness committee. Goals of the wellness committee include gathering ideas, suggestions and feedback for existing and future programming, provide outcome data related to employee wellness and allow members to report on upcoming health related events at their local clinics.

This approach has helped to improve communication between departments and increase general awareness. Increased awareness has led to additional promotion of programs and/or resources ensuring messages reach a wider employee audience. Members of the wellness committee and IHPM are expected to be wellness champions for their respective area/department. The wellness champions help communicate wellness challenges and available resources to their colleagues.

Corporate Communications and Marketing has been a key partner in delivering important internal communications to employees. Employee wellness programs and resources are professionally communicated via newsletters, fliers and promotion on the Gundersen employee intranet. Other outlets are also used to connect employees with internal and community resources, such as monthly bulletin boards outside the hospital cafeteria and 'Bathroom Banter', which provide health messages in employee bathroom stalls. In addition, after completing the annual Personal Health Assessment (PHA), an individual summary report is provided to the employee. The report provides recommendations based on the individual's responses throughout the assessment. It also includes information on available resources both internally and externally. Internal resources include the Sleep Disorder Center, Heart Institute, Nutrition Therapy, Nutrition Services, Telephone



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HEALTHCARE WEEK

Nurse Advisor, Behavioral Health, Great Rivers 211 (24 hour crisis and resource phone line) and the Gundersen Renewal Center (provides tools to achieve balance). External health resources include information on the Campaign to Change Direction, a community program bringing awareness of emotional wellbeing, medication drop-off sites providing options for safe medication disposal, and community run/walk events. Those who complete the PHA can also opt-in to receive regular promotional emails on wellness programs.

This comprehensive approach has also inspired collaboration and alignment of work to maximize both resources and impact. Sometimes collaboration means working together directly on a project or sharing resources. For instance, registered dietitians from the Nutrition Therapy department have developed nutrition videos for the healthy weight component of the *MyHealth Reward* (MHR) program. MHR is the core program of the *MyHealth* programming model. Nutrition Therapy along with Food Service was instrumental in implementing daily \$.25 vegetable and fruit options in the cafeteria. Other times, collaboration means aligning resources and/or program strategies to mutually support a shared goal. For example, both OPH and Employee Health share a common goal of keeping employees healthy and at work. One way this is accomplished is by making sure employees are up to date with recommended vaccinations. Employee Health promotes compliance by offering annual influenza and tetanus vaccinations at no cost to employees. The OPH also promotes compliance by making it a component of the *MHR* program. In order for an employee to receive the full *MHR* cash payout, he/she must be up to date with preventive care screenings which include age recommended vaccinations. Prior to the flu vaccine being added to the *MHR* program, Gundersen employee compliance rate, organization-wide, was 77%. After the implementation, the rate has consistently been 90%-95%.



### COLLECTION OF MEANINGFUL DATA TO EVOLVE A WELLNESS STRATEGY: WELL WORKPLACE BENCHMARK 3

The OPH puts a high priority on being data driven. An IHPM dashboard contains a suite of organizational level metrics used to monitor trends and impact over time. The dashboard metrics align to strategic goals around health, safety, absenteeism, culture, and healthcare and is updated on an annual basis.

Members of the IHPM committee are asked to contribute data for the dashboard from their respective areas, and this is reviewed at an annual committee meeting. The data comes from multiple sources - Personal Health Assessment results, Employee Wellness Survey results, a brief anonymous behavior survey, OSHA injury reports, workman compensation claims data, Family Medical Leave data, Employee Assistance Program data, Engagement survey data, and health plan reports.

The dashboard shows progress over time. For instance, within the ‘Health Behaviors and Conditions’ section of the dashboard, there has been reduction over the years in the percentage of employees at risk for tobacco, lack of fruit and vegetable consumption and lack of physical activity. Within the ‘Injury and Safety’ section, there has been substantial downward trends in the OSHA recordable injury rate and the Work Compensation claim rate. Within the ‘Healthcare’ section, there is increasing compliance with preventive care screenings and use of generic drug utilization. Within the “Culture of Health” section, results from an annual employee perception survey are used to measure engagement, a tested measure for employee satisfaction. While engagement has been high, there are concerns around dealing with rapid change in



WALKING TRAIL

the healthcare industry, increased workloads, and increased stress. This is also reflected in comments provided through the Employee Wellness Survey. There has been an increase in EAP utilization, which can be desirable if it means more people are getting help.

These trends have prompted GHS to focus on self-care, resilience and improving vitality in the workplace. This shift is reflected in OPH wellness programming as well. Recent wellness challenges have incorporated components intended to improve mental health, promote self-care and build resilience. In addition, future *MyHealth Reward* programming will focus more on self-care.

Healthcare continues to see tremendous change with technology, reimbursement process and patient preferences which all play a part in the ongoing stress of our existing healthcare systems. Gundersen is adjusting future programming to include aspects of self-care that emphasize the whole person mentally and physically. Through this adjustment, the organization expects to improve the health, safety, and lifestyle of its employees. Engaging our employees enables them to take better care of themselves, their teams and thus improved patient care. Engaged employees and workgroups are more productive, have fewer safety incidents and less absenteeism.



## About the Organization

Consistently ranked as one of the top-50 health systems in the country, Gundersen Health System is a physician-led, not-for-profit comprehensive healthcare network including one of the nation's largest multispecialty group medical practices, regional community clinics, hospitals, behavioral health services, vision centers, pharmacies, and air and ground ambulances. Services are located throughout western Wisconsin, northeastern Iowa and southeastern Minnesota.

Gundersen is also a regional referral center with regional critical access rural hospitals, Gundersen Medical Center and is a teaching hospital with 325 beds and a Level II Trauma and Emergency Center. Gundersen is environmentally responsible, the first health system to achieve energy independence in October 2014.

Gundersen Health System employs nearly 7,500 employees; 78% are female, 22% are male. The average age of all Gundersen employees is 42.4 and the average employment length is 10 years. Gundersen serves a tri-state region with 75% of the employees being working in La Crosse, WI, 15% in Onalaska, WI, 9% working in 25 different locations across 3 states, and the remaining 1% working from home.

## About the Office of Population Health

Gundersen's Office of Population Health employs seven wellness education specialists who lead the programming that Gundersen offers for its employees and community. The wellness specialists are the primary leaders of employee wellness programming at Gundersen and help connect to other programs and resources that are available to employees. The Office of Population Health conducts the annual *MyHealth Reward* program and supplemental *MyHealth* programming.

### APPENDIX A: FULL PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Employee wellness has been a defined priority at Gundersen Health System since 1997. The Office of Population Health (OPH) leads employee wellness initiatives for the organization. Several of the wellness programs at Gundersen are organized and operated under the label of *MyHealth*. Started in 2005, the *MyHealth* brand encompasses a variety of employee wellness programs including annual biometric screenings, wellness challenges, on-site fitness centers, wellness coaching and more. As *MyHealth* implies, it is the employee who is responsible and accountable for her or his own health and wellbeing. *MyHealth* programs and services are offered as tools and support for the employee in his/her efforts to achieve and maintain

health. Gundersen employee wellness programs are all participation-based and employees are not penalized for not participating in wellness programming.

The core program of the *MyHealth* programming model is called *MyHealth Reward (MHR)*. All employees are eligible to participate. In addition, employees who are benefit eligible and at least 0.5 FTE can earn a cash payout. Each year, Gundersen offers employees the opportunity to attend a MHR screening and to complete a Personal Health Assessment (PHA). This PHA was developed by OPH in 2010 in order to better meet the needs of employees and be community and culture specific. The MHR screening involves a BMI calculation, tobacco status, and preventive care and immunization compliance. During the screening all participants meet with a Wellness Education Specialist to review results and identify next steps. By completing the MHR screening and PHA, eligible employees earn a Level 1 cash payout. Employees that meet criteria on preventive care compliance, tobacco use and healthy weight are eligible for a Level 2 cash payout.

Between 70%-80% of all GHS employees engage in some component of the *MyHealth Reward* program every year. High engagement rates have led to positive outcomes. The percentage of employees using tobacco continues to decrease. According to data from the Employee Wellness Survey, a brief anonymous behavior survey, the percent of GHS employees at risk for tobacco use in 2008 was 11.6%. In 2019, it was 8.7%. For those who participate in MHR, the percent that use tobacco was 4.4% in 2019. Furthermore, those who complete the tobacco cessation component of MHR are more likely to be tobacco free one year later when compared to tobacco users that do not complete. For those who participate in MHR, the percent of participants up-to-date with all preventive care screenings by program end has consistently been above 90%. In addition, compliance for health plan members as indicated on health plan reports is consistently higher than the health plan's normal book of business. Employees who complete the healthy weight portion of MHR have consistently seen positive outcomes in weight change 12 months later while also improving physical activity and fruit and vegetable consumption. Despite these positive outcomes for those participating in this component of the MHR program, there hasn't been a reduction in the percentage of GHS employees at risk for obesity at an organization level. It speaks to the challenge of affecting a population trend of increasing obesity. In an effort to improve the health of all employees, planning and evaluation of the current MHR program is taking place.

Other programs implemented collaboratively between OPH and other departments system-wide include:

- » Annual Personal Health Assessment and health screening
- » Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services
- » HeartMath stress management program
- » DeStress program
- » Envision sustainability challenge
- » Free fitness center for employees, onsite exercise classes, fitness facility discounts
- » Wellness coaching
- » Discount on over the counter nicotine replacement products
- » Wellness challenges on a variety of wellness topics
- » Walking paths and bike parking
- » Lower-cost high-nutrient options in the cafeteria and vending
- » 25 cent fruits and vegetables in the cafeteria
- » Free and low-cost nicotine cessation programs
- » Fostering Healthy Relationships workshop
- » Winter slips and falls prevention
- » Preventive care screening compliance (MHR)
- » Influenza and tetanus vaccinations
- » Worker's compensation case management
- » Infectious disease monitoring
- » Workplace violence prevention program
- » Ergonomics program
- » Indoor air quality
- » Illness tracking
- » Bloodborne pathogen exposure follow-up
- » Respiratory protection
- » Hearing conservation
- » MyCare online portal, and education for appropriate healthcare utilization
- » Great Rivers 211
- » Telephone Nurse Advisor

## About the Authors



### **CINDY KARTMAN, B.S., MScA**

Business Intelligence Specialist  
Office of Population Health • Gundersen Health System

Cindy Kartman is a Business Intelligence Specialist in the Office of Population Health at Gundersen Health System and has been in this role since 2018. She supports the department in all things data and evaluation – data management, reporting, data visualization, survey development, and evaluation design. She has a B.S. from Winona State University in Community Health, a M.S. from University of Wisconsin - La Crosse in Exercise Physiology, and a M.S. from the University of Chicago in Data Analytics. Prior to returning to school and starting work as a data analyst in 2015, Cindy worked as a health educator for 13 years. This included program planning and policy work for multiple audiences – worksites, school, and community. In her free time, she enjoys traveling, hiking, golfing, and boating.



### **CARRIE ZIMMERMAN, B.S., CHES**

Wellness Education Specialist  
Office of Population Health • Gundersen Health System

Carrie Zimmerman, B.S., CHES is a Wellness Education Specialist in the Office of Population Health at Gundersen Health System. Carrie coordinates employee wellness program and Minutes in Motion community physical activity challenge. Carrie facilitates Health Living with Diabetes and Healthy Living with Chronic Pain courses and also serves on various community coalitions and internal workgroups. Carrie is a wellness coach for Gundersen Health System and enjoys working with employees to set and attain goals related to their health and wellness. Carrie holds a Bachelor's degree in Community Health Education from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. In her free time she enjoys running outside and spending time with her husband and 1 year old son.



### **JESSICA BOLAND, B.S., MPH**

Worksite Wellness Consultant,  
Office of Population Health • Gundersen Health System

Jessica Boland, B.S., MPH, is a Worksite Wellness Consultant in the Office of Population Health at Gundersen Health System. Jessica leads the department's worksite wellness initiatives by coordinating and staffing health events, providing point of care testing, biometric screenings, and serving as a resource for participants regarding follow-up care options. She works with business leaders in the design, development and implementation of employee programs and services that will meet employee business objectives. In addition, Jessica is a wellness coach and loves to help people set and achieve wellness goals. Jessica holds a Bachelor's degree in Community Health Education and a Master's degree in Public Health from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. In her free time she enjoys serving in leadership roles in her children's swimming and baseball teams.

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17002 MARCY STREET, SUITE 140 | OMAHA, NE 68118  
402.827.3590 | WELCOA.ORG

