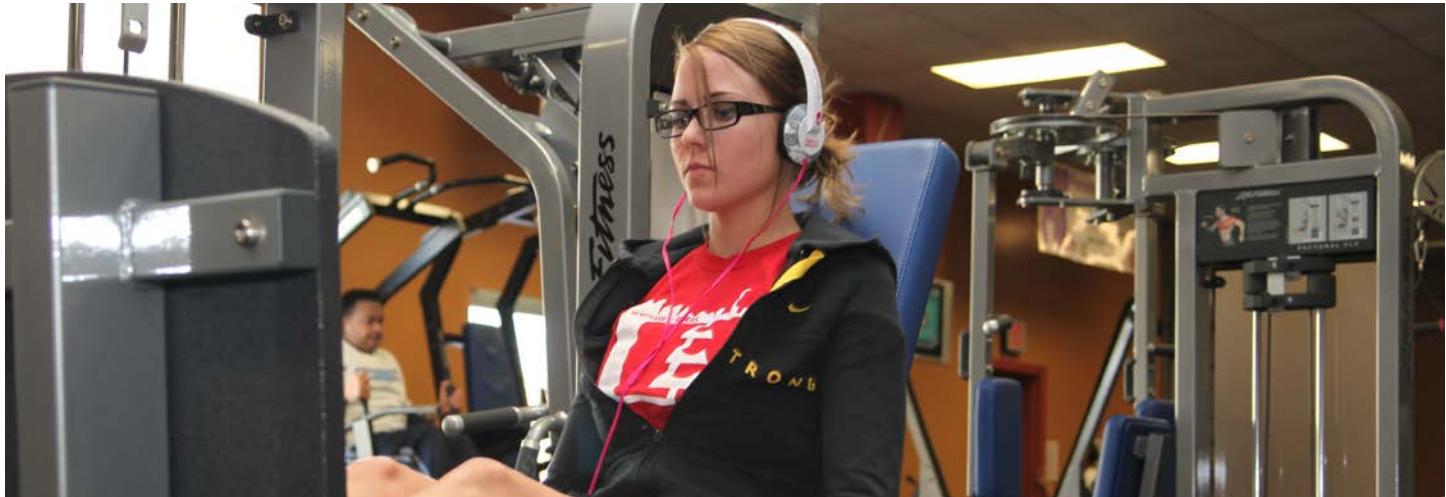


# Worksite Physical Activity Success Story: Utah

## Employee-Initiated Success



### WORKSITE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN UTAH: OVERVIEW

Utah has traditionally been one of the healthiest states in the country.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the latest health rankings place Utah fifth in the country for overall health, measured by indicators such as smoking prevalence, drug use, and physical activity.

One strategy that is helping to foster a culture of health and wellness is Governor Gary Herbert's statewide Work Well Challenge. The Challenge, issued to all state employers, includes a handbook, developed and sponsored by the Public Employee's Health Program. In addition to encouraging employees to exercise during work hours (the Utah Department of Health has an exercise release time policy that allows employees to use up to 30 minutes, three times per week of their work hours for exercise, at the discretion of their supervisor), the Challenge promotes the formation of employee wellness councils and provides a roadmap, in the form of "challenges," for creating an engaged and active workplace. Wellness councils use the roadmap of challenges to vie for points. The highest scoring councils receive a substantial cash reward that can be used to further their mission.

Ultimately, this approach relies on the efforts of

self-initiated volunteer councils that must deal with unique local challenges in order to achieve success. The following success story highlights the efforts of two wellness councils within the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) that achieved substantial successes through the efforts of their volunteer members.

Additionally, both of the highlighted councils chose to initiate onsite gym facilities with limited resources. This success story also explores the processes that gave rise to these employee-initiated, onsite fitness centers within the Cannon and Highland UDOH locations. Lastly, this story will highlight key resources, actions, and facilitators that interviewees indicated were integral to their success, in addition to recommendations for organizations hoping to implement similar initiatives.

### ONSITE GYM FACILITIES

The UDOH is distributed across four buildings in Salt Lake City and Taylorsville, and three of them have an onsite gym located within their building. Below is the story of how the two main UDOH buildings came to have onsite gym facilities and a thriving workplace wellness culture.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.americashealthrankings.org/UT>

## CANNON HEALTH BUILDING

### ***Overview***

The Cannon Health Building, located in Salt Lake City, is the UDOH's main building. It houses around 700 to 800 employees.

The Cannon Gym is located directly within the building. It contains a variety of equipment to support both cardiovascular fitness and strength training. Group exercise classes take place on a weekly basis, such as Zumba, aerobics, and yoga. Showers and lockers are onsite and available to members.

### ***Beginnings***

The space for the Cannon Gym was identified during the early days of the health department. When health department employees moved into the space in 1986, showers and lockers were included as part of the original building plans with the intent of eventually building out a gym.

Motivated employees contributed their own secondhand equipment to fill the space. Soon after, the Wellness Council was formed to oversee crucial functions such as membership, upkeep, and group activities. These responsibilities were later transitioned to the Fitness Committee.

### ***Membership***

Membership is open to all state employees within a mile radius and anyone who works within the building (including contractors or part-time workers). Membership dues are currently \$60/year and include use of the center's equipment. Group exercise classes are also available for an extra dollar per class for members. Group classes are held during work hours. Employees can use their release time to participate in yoga, Zumba, or any other group classes being offered at that time (past examples include cardio circuit training, hot hula, and belly dancing).

The Fitness Committee receives, and is responsible for overseeing, all payments for membership dues. It also determines how the money will be spent (e.g., to host a wellness event, make gym repairs, etc.)



### ***Oversight***

Two voluntary committees oversee the gym and worksite physical activity: the Fitness Committee and Wellness Council. They are comprised of up to 12 staff volunteers, each of whom has permission from their supervisor to allocate some of their time for committee meetings.

The Fitness Committee handles all of the gym logistics, including membership dues and gym upkeep. It is responsible for maintaining the equipment, including hiring someone to make repairs when appropriate, and keeping the area tidy. Funding for this work comes from the membership dues.

The Wellness Council oversees worksite physical activity more broadly, including organization-wide endeavors such as wellness challenges (e.g., stair walks). Though the Fitness Committee and Wellness Council operate independently, they sometimes work together to organize and sponsor wellness events, such as a recent 5K race.

### ***Group Classes***

Many of the group classes are led by staff who are certified fitness instructors. Local fitness instructors are also invited to lead classes and, as an extra incentive, advertise their services. All instructors receive a base salary of \$13 per class plus an additional \$1 from each participant per class.

### ***Safety***

To account for liability issues, gym users are required to sign a liability waiver upon receiving their membership.

### ***Additional Worksite Physical Activity Endeavors***

Worksite physical activity in the UDOH takes place outside of the gym as well. The UDOH has held a number of department-wide challenges including races, stair climbs, and promotions for walking along the Jordan River Parkway, a nearby outdoor path. Additionally, there are future plans to

improve the infrastructure for individuals who bike to work, including lockers and a “fix-it” station for bike repairs.

## HIGHLAND DRIVE BUILDING GYM

### *Overview*

In 2007, approximately 100 employees from the Cannon Health Building were relocated to the Highland Drive Building, where there was no identified gym space. Thus began a grassroots effort to create a new gym, similar in nature to that of the Cannon Building

**“I ended up finding a closet full of junk. So it was our wellness closet.”**

Without external funding or formal financial support, the process began when employee Michelle Muirbrook searched for a gym location on her own. She finally secured a location: a closet that they later coined the “Fitness Closet.”

After willing employees received permission and identified a location, they pooled resources, including both decorative materials (e.g. fitness posters) and gym equipment. The newly formed Wellness Council organized an informal call for equipment donations and received even more materials. They were also able to hold an internal auction through the collection of miscellaneous (non-gym related) goods and raised money to purchase a used treadmill.

Eventually, as interest and participation increased, the gym was moved into a bigger room that fit more equipment, had windows and was fitted with a television.

### *Membership*

Membership is open to all employees within the building (exclusively UDOH employees). The cost is \$30 per year or \$18 for half a year.

### *Oversight*

All gym functions are maintained and overseen by the Wellness Council. Specifically, the council oversees the collection and allocation of membership dues, gym equipment maintenance, and any other issues that arise for gym members.

### *Group Classes*

Though Highland Drive does not have a formal group exercise schedule, employees sometimes take it upon themselves to host an informal group exercise event like aerobics or yoga.

Also, a personal trainer is periodically invited by the Wellness Council to the building and, for a small fee, employees can meet with the personal trainer for a workout session. The personal

trainer is paid \$20/hour by the Council in addition to the money provided directly by the employees.

### *Safety*

Like the Cannon Building, all Highland Drive Gym users are required to sign a liability waiver upon receiving their membership.

### *Additional Worksite Physical Activity Endeavors*

In addition to operating a gym, Highland Drive employees are engaged in additional components of worksite wellness -- many of which are guided by the Work Well Challenge. This includes “brown bag” presentations, where an employee or an external expert shares information about health and wellness with their colleagues or the employees during the lunch period.

The employees also participated in a walking challenge. The walking program (which is ongoing) consists of the utilization of one of two established walking routes—moderate or difficult. Once participants complete a walk, they fill out a walk card. After 14 walks are completed and signed off by a Wellness Council member, participants are able to enter a raffle to win a prize. Prizes are drawn on a quarterly basis and those who win are able to claim a prize of their choice.

Both the Highland Drive and Cannon Building employees are engaged in worksite physical activity in and outside their own gyms. Their active Wellness Council and Fitness Council provide the necessary infrastructure and support, and interviewees anticipate employee participation will continue to drive their efforts in new and creative ways.

## **USER'S PERSPECTIVE**

The effects of having a gym on-site are experienced both collectively (improved morale and productivity for the organization) and individually (improved individual health and wellness).

**“You don’t feel good if you don’t do it.”**

One individual credited her access to a workplace gym as an integral facilitator of her successful weight-loss plan. She used her lunch hour, along with the paid exercise time allowed by her workplace, to work out five days a week. She explained that it was crucial to have the infrastructure support and accessibility to exercise at work, since she found prioritizing exercise in the evening difficult.

Other staff saw an onsite gym as an opportunity to share some of their extra-curricular activities in the workplace. A yoga instructor who usually practices during her off hours was able to teach her co-workers yoga by facilitating a yoga class. An aerobics aficionado was able to get her co-workers

moving and socializing in a supportive environment and space.



In addition to improving fitness, the gyms in the workplaces have enabled the employees to socialize and meet people outside of their departments – colleagues they otherwise would be unlikely to meet.

Ultimately, those who chose to regularly partake in physical activity in the workplace felt it enhanced their work life, allowing them to be happier and more productive employees.

## FACILITATORS & BARRIERS

### FACILITATORS

Successful worksite physical activity endeavors rely on a number of critical facilitators.

#### *Governor's Work Well Challenge*

Interviewees indicated that having an official document from the governor was helpful in achieving internal buy-in as well as support from leadership.

Below is an example of Work Well worksite physical activity activities:

Offer a one-time, onsite fitness class. (x5)
Sponsor a seminar or brown bag presentation addressing a physical activity topic. Have a least 25 percent or 15 employees attend
Hold a weight room or exercise room orientation for proper education on equipment use.
Hold at least one agency hike with employees. Invite families if applicable.
Organize a walking or exercise group. Set a consistent time and place.

Capitalizing on the opportunity, the Highland Drive Building placed first in the Work Well Challenge and was awarded \$2,000. With the award money they were able to purchase picnic tables and incentive prizes for internal physical activity challenges.

### ***Space and Infrastructure***

Space was crucial in the stories shared by the UDOH interviewees. In the case of Highland Drive, allocating space meant being creative and flexible. For the Cannon Building, it meant leveraging existing infrastructure with support from fellow employees, including much of the original gym equipment.

Ongoing maintenance and oversight are also key success facilitators. Interviewees credited both their Wellness Council and the maintenance support provided by their building staff in keeping their gyms in working condition and available to all employees.

### ***Leadership and Staff Buy-In***

At the UDOH, using exercise release time (30 min/3 times/week) requires the approval of a supervisor. Therefore leadership buy-in was crucial in cultivating an environment in which exercise is supported in the workplace.

Further, both gyms rely significantly on membership dues for maintenance, supplies, and the purchase of any new equipment. Without large-scale administrative buy-in, there would be no gyms for staff who wished to exercise during work hours.

### **BARRIERS**

Cannon Building and Highland Drive employees experienced a number of challenges in implementing their worksite physical activity initiatives.

#### *Trust*

As previously mentioned, gym utilization is at each employee's supervisor's discretion. To allow an employee to use work hours to exercise requires trust that the employee is not using that time to do other non-work related activities. It follows that if a supervisor is not willing to trust their employees, this would be a significant barrier to both gym use and worksite physical activity participation in general.



## ***Structural Shortcomings***

A high-functioning gym (one with a variety of equipment, private showers, and lockers) requires a significant amount of space and may not be possible if some of the items did not exist in that location already. Adequate space was cited as a significant barrier to both gym creation and use (for example, having a gym without showers was cited as a potential reason an employee may not use the gym).

## ***Participation***

One interviewee described low participation as a potential threat to the gym's ongoing availability.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Interviewees provided a number of recommendations to other organizations working to implement worksite physical activity. They included:

- Seek support from directors, management, the people that are in charge of the building (be aware of the restrictions posed by your building), and even the governor.
- Consider small changes within an organization. For example, one interviewee suggested changing the ritual around office occasions such as birthdays to incorporate healthier habits like exercise. Another example given included a walk as part of a going-away party instead of the traditional unhealthy food.
- Hold a raffle for new users who have recently begun to engage in regular physical activity at the worksite gyms.
- Advertise worksite physical activities well (e.g., in bathrooms) and create brochures that are available from Human Resources during the on-boarding process.
- Send out emails to remind employees of the worksite physical activity options available to them.
- Build support internally to ensure work culture is supportive of worksite physical activity.

## **CONCLUSION**

With the support of their governor, the help of motivated employees, and well-developed Wellness Councils, the UDOH is demonstrating exciting worksite physical activity success. Interviewee suggested motivated employees continue to leverage the support from leadership and their access to onsite gym facilities to enhance their work life, building a culture of health and wellness within their department and their state.

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