



IN DEPTH: GA. 400 MARKET REPORT AND INSURANCE & EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

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Insurance & Employee Benefits

Fieldale Farms shows wellness programs pay

The Baldwin-based poultry company has kept health care costs to less than half the national average

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In 1991, Tom Hensley looked at his company's rising health care costs, imagined a future of double digit increases and realized something had to be done.

The chief financial officer at [Fieldale Farms Corp.](#), a family-owned poultry producer located in North Georgia, Hensley read about a different approach -- preventing disease and sickness to cut health-care costs -- and it appealed to him. Hensley took the idea to his human resource department. He wanted them to determine which health care issue was costing the company the most and to come up with a solution.

Denise Ivester, group health and wellness manager at Fieldale Farms, collected data from the company's third-party provider, Blue Cross and [Blue Shield of Georgia Inc.](#) The high cost culprit? Cardiovascular disease, which can result in a heart attack or stroke. (The cost of caring for an employee who has suffered a stroke can cost a company \$250,000 the first year.)

To identify high-risk employees, Fieldale Farms began in 1992 to offer on-site screenings to its 4,200 employees. It also instituted programs to help those employees reduce their risk.

In 2004, a dozen years after launching the program, the annual health care cost per Fieldale Farm employee averaged \$3,052 -- less than half the national average of \$6,900. Where most

companies' health-care costs increased annually between 10 percent and 20 percent, Fieldale Farm's annual health benefits costs increase has averaged 2.5 percent since 1992.

And the company has added benefits.

The key to making it work, noted Ivester, is making prevention a process. "You can't just tell people they're at risk," she said. "You have to put in a program that addresses that area."

If Fieldale Farms weren't located in Baldwin, a town of 2,500, it may not have taken a decade for news of the company's successful health care program to travel. In July 2002, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention awarded the Georgia Department of Human Resources, Division of Public Health -- more specifically, the Cardiovascular Health Initiative (CVHI) -- a \$5 million grant over five years to fight cardiovascular disease, CVD, the leading cause of death in Georgia.

A part of the plan to fight the disease included educating businesses about CVD. To do that, Pam Wilson, worksite specialist for the Cardiovascular Health Initiative, put together a "Business Expert Panel" to discuss the lack of direction in worksite health promotion. She enlisted the help of [Health Navigators LLC](#), a company that specializes in bringing health care solutions to businesses.

At the urging of the state's local health representative in the North Georgia area who'd heard about Fieldale's success, the group toured Fieldale Farms.

"The more they talked, the more we learned and the more we knew we needed to sit down and hear what they had to say," said Wilson.

Today, Fieldale Farms is recognized by the CDC as one of its six nationwide "CDC models."

"Our goal is still the same -- to impact employee health and to give our employees opportunities to impact their health and the bottom line is to reduce cost," said Ivester.

Since the CDC grant was awarded, Health Navigators, which conducts the Cardiovascular Health Initiative's workshops, has reached 1,000 businesses, representing over 1 million employees.

"The 12-year Fieldale experience rules out the flash-in-the-pan story," said Peter Townsley, principal at Health Navigators. "They've proven that an opportunity to decrease the increases [in health-care costs] exists."

One company that's following in Fieldale's footsteps is [Cartersville's TI Group Automotive Systems LLC](#). "The Fieldale Model and their type of cost experiences is where we want to be," said Leo Jolicoeur, TI Auto's controller.

TI Auto decided to use a combination of different models presented by Health Navigators. In the Fieldale model, screenings are voluntary, though the company offers gift certificates and prizes to entice employees to get screened. TI Auto offered participants in the plan a lower deductible. The results were heady; 98 percent of TI Auto's 280 Cartersville-based employees signed up.

"[Getting employees to sign up] is the key to getting the data and that falls in line with the way we do business. We're a data-driven, process-driven company," added Jolicoeur, who notes that without the state's guidance, the company could not have done this. "Now it's in our culture. It's in our business plan. We're measured to it and we will find ways to improve it."

If the program continues to work well in Cartersville, the company plans to roll it out companywide.

Michele Talka, director of employer services, The McCart Group, believes the key to a successful program is in keeping those identified high-risk employees on the road to a healthier lifestyle. Most of the things that contribute to cardiovascular disease can be controlled, and doing so has a huge impact, said Talka.

"Most people can do it for a month, but it's how to keep them motivated. That has to be designed into the plan -- incentives and disincentives to keep them on track," Talka added.

At Fieldale, high-risk individuals have several programs available to them, including nutritional classes and gym memberships. Fieldale will pay for the membership as long as the employee goes to the gym at least six times a month.

TI Auto goes further; employees have to hit the gym eight times a month.

Both companies partner with local hospitals to do the screenings.

Fieldale Farms opened an on-site health center and pharmacy in February to further cut costs. Employees can visit the full-time doctor in the clinic for \$10.

The company also employs a nurse, an exercise physiologist, and a dietitian.

"Fieldale Farms recognized that improving employee health was the only way to drive down costs in the long run," said Robbie Burlas, principal at Health Navigators.

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