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Get to Know ASSE’s Health & Wellness Branch
By Deborah Fell-Carlson

If you have been intrigued by the buzz about how wellness could help take your workplace injury prevention efforts to a new level, check out the ASSE Health and Wellness Branch.

As with other hopeful practice specialties, ASSE’s Health and Wellness Branch must first grow as a branch under an existing practice specialty. The Health and Wellness Branch is being nurtured under the Healthcare Practice Specialty, but just to be clear, this branch is about health and its impact on safety, not about healthcare. It applies to all of us.

As safety professionals, we may not think about the fact that healthy, alert workers suffer fewer on-the-job injuries and recover more quickly when hurt. This can have a significant impact on our workers’ compensation costs. On the flip side, we also may not appreciate the impact of our worksite injury prevention efforts on workers’ home lives. Workers who model safe work habits at home and teach them to their families help prevent off-the-job injuries.

Although it may be difficult to measure the effects, we know that managing wellness and injury together is a win-win. ASSE understands this.

Health and wellness issues are generally not addressed in the realm of the safety professional. Safety meetings and strategy sessions generally involve discussions about culture, management systems, the nuts and bolts of PPE, regulatory requirements, proper procedures and the like. However, the reality is that many of the attitudes and behaviors of management and line/labor employees that adversely affect health and wellness also lead to injuries, property damage and environmental incidents. We can probably recall an incident in which a skilled, tenured and well-respected worker overlooked an important safety check and suffered an injury as a result. Perhaps we joined the supervisors, scratching our heads, wondering why this worker did that. When workers are not in optimal health, they are not as alert as they could—or should—be. When we are not on our game we make mistakes and sometimes these mistakes can be fatal. The short- and long-term implications are tremendous.

NIOSH has embraced this as the Total Worker Health (TWH) approach. Launched in June 2011 as an evolution of the NIOSH WorkLife initiatives and NIOSH Steps to a Healthier U.S. Workforce, the NIOSH TWH approach “is a strategy integrating occupational safety and health protection with health promotion to prevent worker injury and illness and to advance health and well-being.” NIOSH has funded four Centers of Excellence to advance this effort. The Center for the Promotion of Health in the New England Workplace, the Harvard School of Public Health Center for Work Health and Well-Being, the Oregon Healthy Workforce Center, and the University of Iowa Healthier Workforce Center for Excellence. Each center is a collaborative partnership with a different research focus.

As safety professionals, we are positioned to bring health and wellness into our fold and further enhance the value of our profession to employers. The ASSE Health and Wellness Branch was
established in August 2011, not long after NIOSH launched TWH, to help us do just that. Membership is growing, but ASSE members with expertise or just an interest in health promotion are needed to strengthen that foundation. The purpose of the Health and Wellness Branch, and ultimately the next stage of its evolution as the Health and Wellness Practice Specialty, is to provide a forum to raise awareness and educate ASSE members at large, as well as members within the branch. Branch members strive to broaden their own practical knowledge and skills, and are eager to help other safety professionals to help shape worker attitudes, thinking and behaviors that may result in improved personal and global health and well-being.

The branch maintains a body of knowledge with tools and resources to help safety professionals become proficient in influencing:

- employees to make appropriate lifestyle choices;
- employers to provide appropriate tools, programs and infrastructure that will facilitate appropriate employee lifestyle choices;
- employers to recognize safety professional contributions as value added to their organizations.

Join us as we educate ourselves on injury prevention through health and wellness so that we can better educate our colleagues and employers. The statistics are compelling; the studies are plentiful. Wellness programs save money directly in workers’ compensation costs, and indirectly in improved productivity and worker quality of life.

Join the Health and Wellness Branch today. You must first join the Healthcare Practice Specialty, which will make you eligible to join the Health and Wellness Branch for free.

To learn more or to find out how you can get involved, please visit www.asse.org/practicespecialties/healthandwellness/index.php and contact Jill Kelby at jill@kelbyergodesign.com.