Township Employees Walk to Toronto

Approximately one-third of the Sylvania Township workforce has begun a virtual walk to Toronto as a new facet in its extensive wellness program. The virtual walk is in conjunction with a program sponsored by the American Heart Association. The local chapter of the association uses a program which counts steps and translates other forms of exercise into steps as teams of three make their way to the Canadian city. Each member of the 19 teams will take the nearly 300 mile trek for the journey by walking 4,730 steps per day until the program concludes March 31. Christina Colvin, of the local heart association, said the average person walks about 2,000 steps in a normal day. She said the increased exercise not only is a benefit to heart health, but aids in losing weight and general well-being.

There will be stops in Windsor and Woodstock, Ontario, a sister-city of the township, along the way, according to Sami Babkiewicz, who is coordinating the event. She said prizes will be awarded at the stops, but what they are is a secret. The prizes won't be awarded until each member of the team has reached the goal.

The same is true for the conclusion at Toronto. A team can't just pick a marathon runner and then the other members do nothing. Everyone has to get to Toronto for the team to finish," Ms. Babkiewicz said.

Ms. Colvin said she is impressed by the number of employees who have chosen to participate. The heart association has made the activity available to a number of local companies and agencies, "and we usually see a bump up in participation the second and third years, because people see the fun of it and the benefits. "It's very impressive to see such a large percentage get involved the first year," she said.

This could be true for the township, at least in part, because of the active wellness programs available to Sylvania Township employees.

Points earned by finishing the walk to Toronto will be added to points earned in other endeavors available during the year. Reaching a sufficient point total by the end of the year can earn an employee a prize of $100 or a day off work. "Instead of calling in sick an employee can get a well day off," according to Susan Wood, assistant township administrator, who has stressed using some wellness programs which had been in effect and adding to them, with the walk to Toronto being the most recent example.

Ms. Wood said the efforts are in part driven as a hoped-for antidote for rising health insurance costs, but also simply as an informal benefit meant to result in healthier, happier workers.

John Jennewine, chairman of the Sylvania Township trustees, agreed that one of the motivating factors in the overall wellness program is the hope for containing health insurance costs and in reducing the number of sick days. He added that there are less-measurable benefits in having a more efficient, healthy workforce. He also said that being physically fit is its own reward for each of the employees and that the township is happy to be able to provide ways to achieve it.

Ms. Wood said the township provides payment of all but $10 of a monthly fee for employees who belong to a gym nearby, but only if the employee uses the gym a minimum of six days a month. Otherwise the employee must pay the full fee, usually $35 she said. There also are regular meetings of a Weight Watchers club, and numerous aids available to help a worker stop smoking.

Ms. Wood said it is likely that a second competition will be developed for employees later this year.