

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Senator Murray, and, members of the Committee.
Employer Wellness Programs...

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to share my story about the benefits I received by participating in my company's voluntary wellness program as part of a culture of wellness at my workplace. My name is James Matthew Abernathy. I work in Nashville, Tennessee as a Regional Service Coordinator for BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee. With me today are my wife, Holly, my daughter, Shannon, and my son, Iain.

I am 32 years old and have worked at BlueCross since 2002. Today, I am very pleased to be described as "a picture of health," by my doctors. That's a statement I am very proud of. However, it is also a statement that did not apply to me just a few years ago.

In 2003, doctors described my condition much differently. I weighed 250 pounds, indulged in unhealthy eating and snacking, drank 4 to 5 sodas a day, and did not exercise at all. After completing a health risk assessment, doctors told me I had high blood pressure, was pre-diabetic, and was a high-risk for a heart attack. At the time I was 21 years old and didn't want to listen. So I did what many people do when hearing these kinds of warnings... I didn't go back to my doctor for a number of years.

Things changed after the birth of our daughter, Shannon, in 2007. That's when I made the realization that I had to change. I wanted to improve for my own benefit and for my family. I realized that if I wanted my children's health and their lives to be different than mine that I would have to change my unhealthy habits and break the cycle. My wife, Holly, was and continues to be my number one fan. She supports me, motivates me, and inspires me.

Holly is my rock at home. But I have been lucky because I also receive the help I need from my employer. BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee has a wellness program that is powered by Onlife Health. Early in my career at BlueCross I had participated in the program, but after the birth of Shannon, I went all in. The Onlife program and their professional health coaches not only changed my life, they saved my life.

The wellness program consisted of a number of elements that helped me recognize the unhealthy habits that I had developed, and the options and resources available to me to break those habits and learn new ones. I learned that becoming healthy overnight was not realistic, that it would take time, a commitment on my part, personal accountability, and replacing the unhealthy habits with healthy ones. That meant eating better, being more active, getting more rest, and reducing stress.

With a goal of making life better for me and my family, I took full advantage of Onlife's comprehensive wellness program. It started by taking a health risk assessment that included a biometric screening to measure my weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose levels, and other fitness indicators. The screenings were conveniently done right at my office, and they were free. From the health assessment, my health profile was established. Over the years, I have worked with great health coaches who encourage me, take the time to learn my personal goals, and help me set realistic action plans to achieve those goals. That includes information about proper nutrition... what to eat and drink...and learning that moderation is key. It wasn't that I couldn't eat snacks or even drink a soda now and then. My coaches taught me to eat sensible snacks and foods that were good for me, and to avoid those that were not good for me.

My coaches encouraged me to get moving and to become active. The company set up a walking program and invited employees to track the number of steps we took each day. They provided us with pedometers and rewarded us for reaching step goals. Onlife Health helped me keep track of everything on their secure wellness portal. I can go online anytime and find educational materials about fitness, message my health coach, or track the number of Life Points and other incentives that I have earned.

The financial incentives the company offers further motivate and reward me for doing healthy activities. Incentives are tied to participation in the various programs offered by Onlife. For example, we are rewarded up to \$200 per quarter for reaching our step goals, and I receive discounts on my health insurance.

Today, the financial incentives are secondary to me; my main motivation is maintaining a healthy lifestyle for me and my family. Shannon and Iain now have a dad who is fit and healthy. I have completed 6 half-marathons and 2 full marathons. My weight is down to 188 pounds and I am training to run the toughest trail marathon in the country, the Savage Gulf Marathon in Beersheba Springs, Tennessee, in March. My wife, Holly, is a runner too, and even our 7-year-old enjoys getting out and competing in fun runs, 5Ks and such. What has become a big transformation in my life is now a part of my children's lives.

It's incredible to see this. What was MY wellness journey has become a wellness journey for our entire family.

A few years ago, I was overweight and unhealthy—now I'm not. I never thought I could be healthy. I thought that was something for "other guys." I thought it was something only maintained by elite thin people with active families. Now, I know that's not true.

Testimony of James Matthew Abernathy

Full Committee Hearing – Employer Wellness Programs: Better Health Outcomes and Lower Costs

Jan. 29, 2015

My workplace wellness program gave me the support system I needed to succeed. It made me realize that I wasn't in this alone, that I could get help whether I was at work or at home. And it is contagious. I have many friends and co-workers who have become more active and are now running buddies of mine.

As a result of my new lifestyle, my children will not face many of the struggles I had to deal with in the past. They understand good food choices and moderation (which was foreign to me). I'm thankful for my wife, my workplace wellness program, and my health coaches who helped me change from an overweight, at-risk employee into a picture of health.

Matt Abernathy

Disclaimer:

Mr. Abernathy's testimony is his own account of a personal wellness journey which included participation in a voluntary, formal workplace wellness program. Mr. Abernathy's outcomes are not meant to be representative of, nor can they be reasonably expected for participants in this or similar workplace wellness programs.