

The Business Case for Breastfeeding Supports Business Health

In today's economy, everyone is looking for ways to save money. One way is to offer a corporate lactation program for employers and employees alike.

Fifty-five percent of mothers with children under age three are in the workforce; the growth rate of women in the workforce has increased by 80 percent over the past two decades. When business is family-friendly, both business and families win. How can a business support its employees and help them balance work with family life? The business can develop a corporate lactation program.

A corporate lactation program to support breastfeeding makes good business sense. Consider that every healthcare organization in the world recommends breastfeeding. The health impact of breastfeeding on infants, on children in daycare, and on mothers is well documented. Research tells us that one-day absences to care for sick children occur more than twice as often for mothers of formula-feeding infants. Lower absenteeism rates are good for businesses.

Lower turnover rates are good for businesses. One study of multiple companies with lactation programs found an average retention rate of 94.2 percent; Mutual of Omaha's lactation support program resulted in a retention rate of 83 percent of female employees compared to the national average of 59 percent.

Lower health care costs are good for businesses. CIGNA reported in a two-year study of 343 employees an annual savings of \$240,000 in health care expenses, 62 percent fewer prescriptions, and \$60,000 in reduced absenteeism rates. Mutual of Omaha had a yearly savings of \$115,881 in health care claims among families enrolled in the lactation program. Per person costs were \$1,246 *more* for employees who did not participate in the program.

Companies of all sizes (from 1 to 5 employees to 100 or more) recovered an average of a \$3 return for every \$1 spent on a corporate lactation program, an excellent return on investment.

What is involved in setting up a corporate lactation program? How can my business help its child-bearing employees?

As with any program, there are tiers of service. The basic needs of breastfeeding employees are minimal. An employee would need a flexible schedule to have time to pump. She would need a clean, private place to do this, a place with an electrical outlet and a door that locks. She can use information on how to successfully combine breastfeeding with employment and access to health professionals who can assist with questions and concerns.

Some companies hire or contract with a lactation consultant who offers educational classes and support to the childbearing employees. Other companies have purchased pump equipment and offered discounts to their employees for purchasing this equipment. A lactation professional can be available to offer practical suggestions and encouragement to employees after the baby is born; sometimes, support groups are established as another way to encourage a new mother.

When business aligns itself with the interests of the employee, everyone wins. There are many ways to begin a lactation support program in your business. It can be established as part of company health benefit services, or housed within the wellness division. A taskforce can be convened with key company stakeholders to identify needs and solutions. The program can be promoted with all employees, supervisors and administration to gain buy-in and support.

How can your business get more information and help to set up a corporate lactation program?

Contact Nikki Lee, the lactation consultant at the Philadelphia Department of Public Health. Ms Lee has been attending member orientation meetings at the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce and is available as a resource to any business within Philadelphia; she has a list of lactation professionals who can serve businesses outside the city. Her email address is nikki.lee@phila.gov. Her telephone number is 215-685-5237, extension #1.

(The statistics in this article have been collected by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Healthcare Resources and Services Administration and published in The Business Case for Breastfeeding.)