

### Iowa Uses Employee Assistance Program to Improve State Employees' Emotional and Mental Health

*The Iowa state government's employee assistance program has promoted a positive, healthy work environment for 25 years.*

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are an increasingly common employee benefit, with nearly half of all U.S. private-sector employees receiving access to one. EAPs offer in-person, over-the-phone, and online psychological counseling services to help employees or their family members address personal challenges before they negatively impact their professional lives.

Most EAP vendors offer a standard suit of services, including<sup>1</sup>:

- Confidential assessment and counseling services.
- Referral support, tracking, and followup.
- 24-hour crisis telephone line.
- Substance abuse expertise.
- Emergency intervention and critical incident stress management.
- Dependent and domestic partner coverage.
- Guaranteed confidential record-keeping.

Beyond this standard package, employers can select among a variety of EAP options, such as life-coaching, which aims to help people identify and achieve personal goals, and management consultation and communication.

Through its research into EAP utilization, the Employee Assistance Professionals Association reports that women typically use EAPs more frequently than men. In addition, utilization rates are higher among companies or organizations with smaller numbers of employees, possibly because it can be easier to effectively communicate to smaller groups. Additionally, professionals in helping fields (e.g. social workers, nurses, psychologists) are more likely to use an EAP than those who work in other areas, and the more educated an employee is, the more likely they are to use an EAP. Finally, all EAPs are required to be confidential; however, employees are much more likely to access their EAP if they have confidence in their management, compared to those who mistrust their management.<sup>2</sup>

Since 1988, the Iowa state government has offered an EAP as part of its benefits package. The program offers a limited number of over-the-phone and online counseling and life-coaching sessions. However, if an employee wishes to continue psychological counseling, EAP professionals provide the resources to identify an appropriate counselor who is covered by the employee's health insurance.

#### Steps Taken:

In 1988, the Iowa Department of Administrative Services (DAS) identified EAPs as a new and promising approach to decreasing absenteeism and increasing employees' productivity and engagement at work.

- About 73 percent of state and local government employees have access to an EAP, and 45 percent of employees in the private sector have EAP access.
- Between 4 and 5 percent of the Iowa state government's employees use EAP each year.

DAS identified an EAP vendor that offered the services they sought at a competitive price. Among other legal, administrative, and programmatic specifications, Iowa required the vendor to provide access to an EAP counselor via toll-free telephone number 24/7; problem assessment, including formal evaluation for substance abuse or psychological problems; short-term counseling; legal and financial consultation; critical incident counseling and debriefing; ongoing training for managers and supervisors; on-site visits and communications materials to promote utilization; and data gathering on utilization.

EAP services are provided to all Iowa state government employees. In order to implement the program, Iowa has a network of personnel assistants in its various agencies who serve as an extension of the Human Resources Department for their respective agencies. Additionally, personnel officers work directly with management liaisons in each agency. Managers were trained and continue to receive ongoing training to understand how the Iowa EAP works and how to respond to employees who might require EAP services. New employees receive an overview of EAP's services. Employees receive emails from the EAP each month, and the employee benefit newsletter often includes articles about the EAP. In addition, the Healthy Opportunities Wellness Program has a network of wellness champions throughout state government who provide support for the EAP program.

To maintain a helpful EAP program, DAS maintains constant contact with the EAP vendor to identify potential new services to add to the program. Additionally, to comply with state regulations, Iowa periodically evaluates new EAP vendors, which helps ensure that the government is receiving the best service for the price.

### **Results:**

Today, Iowa's EAP offers multiple counseling and life-coaching options for employees. Employees can opt for three in-person counseling sessions per issue per year, telephone counseling support 24/7, or eight weeks of telephone life coaching. Employees may also choose legal and financial consultation services to assist with personal legal and financial issues that may be distracting from overall well-being and productivity. During the past decade, an average of 4.1 percent of Iowa's state government employees used the EAP service.

### **Lessons Learned:**

To ensure compliance with best practices and encourage employee utilization, EAPs are administered by a third-party vendor. Consequently, it is important for state governments and other employers to identify EAP vendors that offer the best services for their employees. For example, Iowa state employees live all across the state, so a broad provider network was essential for the program to be accessible to all employees. Iowa also decided that it was important to be able to request on-site counseling professionals during a critical incident, such as the death of an employee.

Employees' and employers' needs and desires often change over time, so increasing the variety of program options can make EAPs more attractive and useful for employees. For example, in 2006, Iowa opted to include life-coaching services in its EAP to help employees identify and fulfill personal goals.

As new features are added to the EAP, it is important to ensure that employees, especially managers due to their ability to encourage their employees to utilize the services, are informed of program

updates and how they can draw value from existing offerings. This helps keep employees engaged in the program. Managers who receive training on EAPs and how to refer employees to counseling professionals through the program are more likely to do so than those who do not receive training. Iowa achieves this by sharing the monthly newsletter from their EAP vendor and including EAP articles in some of their monthly benefits newsletters.

EAP vendors not only interface with employees, but also serve as essential resources to employers in their efforts to evaluate and improve EAPs. While departmental management staff and employees at DAS do not have access to the names of individuals seeking out EAP services, requesting that the EAP vendor share aggregated and de-identified utilization data and confidential user feedback with the state government is important to help ensure that the program consistently provides value.

### **Conclusion:**

Although EAPs are increasingly common among both private and public sector employee benefits packages, there is still much to learn about their effectiveness at reducing stress, improving well-being among employees, and improving worker productivity. State governments that have a long history with an EAP vendor should explore how they can collaborate with the vendor to gather substantial effectiveness and satisfaction data from employees who access the program. This additional evidence can serve as a foundation for future adjustments to EAP programs, and hopefully improve the health of employees, their families, and the organization overall.

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<sup>1</sup> Employee Assistance Professionals Association. "The EAP Buyer's Guide." Available at <http://www.eapassn.org/files/public/EAPBuyersGuide.pdf>. Accessed 5-10-2013.

<sup>2</sup> Employee Assistance Professionals Association. "EAP Utilization." Available at <http://www.eapassn.org/files/public/utilization06.pdf>. Accessed 5-10-2013.