

Healthy Workers – Healthy Futures

Case Study: SA Ambulance Service

In line with their strong commitment to the safety and wellbeing of workers, SA Ambulance Service (SAAS) has established a holistic approach to help staff and volunteers maintain a fit and healthy lifestyle inside and outside of the workplace

The Approach

SAAS is a large organisation with 1100 career staff and 1500 volunteers across 108 sites throughout South Australia. Employees and volunteers undertake a variety of roles including front line positions such as paramedics, emergency operations centre staff and patient transport and there are also roles in communication, engineering, maintenance, customer service and administration.

The organisation takes a comprehensive approach to supporting the safety, health and wellbeing of all staff as the means to providing high quality service delivery. SAAS Spirit is both a philosophy and a leadership training program underpinning this approach with line managers actively encouraged to support individuals and empower teams. Evidence shows that the health and wellbeing of staff is more willingly embraced where leaders understand and value staff. Team leader induction training includes information on staff support programs and Work Health and Safety.

The SAASfit initiative seeks to improve the health and wellbeing of all staff. Sound qualitative and quantitative data review and a good understanding of the opportunities to improve health and wellbeing and reduce injury and risks all informed the development of SAASfit. SAASfit is part of SAAS Safe and provides seven tiered programs targeting different health needs, levels of fitness, types of work, rehabilitation requirements and recreational interests.

All staff are encouraged to have an annual health and fitness assessment with the aim of supporting general health and wellbeing and ensuring fitness for duty. These checks also help identify those with higher risk factors that would benefit from additional supports tailored to their needs.

All staff and volunteers are able to participate in one or more of the seven SAASfit programs. Programs are available for all needs but specific groups include those staff at high risk due to age, gender, length of service or other factors; those who have been injured; office based employees with largely sedentary jobs as well as staff who are in high performance roles and those who wish to participate in statewide sporting events eg Corporate Cup or SA Police and Emergency Services Games.

In addition there is access to financial reimbursements/subsidies for health and wellbeing goods and services and referral for specialist allied health services (remedial massages, dietetics, and QUIT SA). Team building sessions such as pilates, sleep/fatigue and boxing are offered. SAAS complies with the SA Health Healthy Food and Drinks Policy¹ ensuring a healthy food environment.

The Rationale

A Workcover review of injury rates and injury management within SAAS prompted the introduction of a program to prevent injuries especially in high-risk areas. Over time, and in line with the increasing focus on staff wellbeing and development, a more proactive approach has been taken to ensuring staff have both the physical and general health capacity to be fit for work and undertake their roles.

Injury prevention is still an important driver. Manual handling and musculo-skeletal related injuries are the biggest risk for staff hence the focus on supporting people to be strong, fit and healthy to reduce this risk.

A focus on wellbeing ensures staff feel valued by the organisation, builds positive relationships and helps with staff satisfaction. Attraction and retention of both staff and volunteers is important, making them feel valued, providing a sense of purpose and ensuring enjoyment in their roles.



SA Ambulance Service Health and Wellbeing Program



Fit with organisational core values

SAAS recognises its workforce as its most valuable asset. The first of the organisation's strategic directions is Our People where it states 'SA Ambulance Service is committed to its people feeling safe, being respected and seeing purpose in their efforts. No operational consideration is more important than our staff's health and safety.'² It goes on to confirm the organisation's commitment to policies that encourage a healthy work-life balance and ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff. The aim is to provide an environment where all staff are safe, healthy, valued and respected.

The commitment to health and safety is complemented by policies on issues such as equity and diversity, peer support, teamwork, staff development, effective leadership, employee assistance programs, manual handling training, retention of staff and social responsibility including fostering 'partnerships for building safer and healthier communities'.

Leadership from the top ensures commitment to staff is supported throughout the organisation. Both the current and previous Chief Executives have extensively promulgated the importance of valuing staff and recognising the demands of the work.

The Process

There are several strands leading to the current approach to health and wellbeing. The development of new service directions in 2008 highlighted the need to ensure staff were willing and able to implement these directions. The SAAS management progressively embedded commitment to supporting staff into all aspects of SAAS including the strategic directions, organisational training programs and budgets.

The more specific focus on injury prevention, chronic disease prevention and the associated approach to the physical health of staff led to the development of SAASfit to ensure staff have both the physical and general health capacity to be fit for work and undertake their roles to their fullest potential.

Initially the program was facilitated by an interested staff member however the uptake and success of health assessments and management support lead to the appointment an Exercise Physiologist as the program Coordinator. SAASfit

now sits within the Staff Wellness and Assistance portfolio within the Operations area of the Office of the CEO at SAAS, whilst maintaining a strong link to Work Health and Safety in the organisation. Specific specialised programs and the general direction of the SAASfit program as a whole are informed by data on high risk groups and rehabilitation needs as well as surveys of the workforce which show strong demand for all aspects of SAASfit. A 2013 comprehensive procedure document sets out the process for accessing the service as well as ancillary information such as reporting requirements, evaluation measures and review dates. Every governance committee agenda currently includes an item on health and safety relative to the specific area within the organisation.

Positives and Achievements

"A programme such as SAASfit provides a strategic opportunity to influence the long term wellbeing of our staff. Return on investment in such programmes is rarely visible or tangible in the short term, however, the long term benefits are extensive, particularly in terms of reduced injury, improved staff wellbeing and reduced lost time."

Robert Morton, Chief Executive Officer

There are a number of important benefits for SAAS from their commitment to health and wellbeing.

Participants of the SAASfit program report satisfactory experiences and value what they have learnt whilst in the program. SAASfit champions (employees who volunteer to advocate and support the program at their respective worksites) are highly valued as is the feedback they provide the coordinator. The many stories of individuals who have made significant changes to their health behaviours is rewarding to all involved.

Participation rates are measured. In 2012-13 SAASfit conducted 242 assessments, an increase of 43 over the previous year. Data collected from health assessments is used to generate an annual snapshot of the health of participants and improvements through participation. This data shows that participants have achieved overall health improvements during the course of the program. Although difficult to measure accurately because of the many variables, SAAS believes workplace injuries have reduced and those staff who are members of SAASfit are less likely to be injured.

The SAAS approach and SAASfit have a high profile and good reputation interstate and overseas as well as within the service.

SAASfit contributes to the identification of improvements to SAAS systems, policies, procedures, programs and practices impacting on the areas of physical wellbeing thereby incorporating the changes into routine practice. It is regularly monitored, reviewed and evaluated to ensure continuous quality improvement of the program.

SAASfit is now well integrated into the organisation and governance sitting as part of the SAAS Safe program. This helps ensure sustainability. Its profile and reputation has grown and the initiative has been supported.

Overcoming the Challenges

Not unexpectedly it can be challenging to get employees who are more at risk to participate in the program. A recent program refresh aimed to make it clear that the program is for all staff, not just those who are already fit and encouraging people to 'have a conversation' about their health with the coordinator. For some, the health assessment can be threatening but again information is provided to show this is not the case.

Finding the best way to engage volunteers can also be difficult. Located across the state, volunteers have varying levels of health and wellbeing and are not always able to commit the time to participate in SAASfit. The SAASfit coordinator attends their twice-yearly conferences as well as training evenings and maintains contact with people through newsletters and emails.

Theoretically it would be possible to see a correlation between participation in SAASfit and reductions in the incidence of injuries and number of Workcover claims however a complex array of factors contribute to workplace injuries.

Those involved are confident that improved health and wellbeing plays a major role in improving productivity, reducing the potential for injury and improving the ability to return to work after an injury.

The Future

SAAS will continue to value their staff as their most important resource and look for ways to build this into all their policies and practices. They also intend to continue to develop and improve the SAASfit initiative despite tight budgetary conditions. Management value the impact of the program on productivity, its alignment with workplace health and safety policies and the importance of preventing rising rates of chronic disease.

Duration and resources

SAASfit has been operating since 2000 with an exercise physiologist employed in 2012 to coordinate, manage and deliver the program across the state. External specialists are used from time to time including dietitians and Pilates instructors. An administrative officer provides assistance with data and reporting.

“Through my years of employment with SAAS I have been an active participant in the SAASfit program. It has helped me to understand my personal fitness & health levels, but also educate me on how to improve and remain fit for work. The combination of diet and exercise advice is extremely beneficial and provides a holistic approach to health and behaviour change. Each year my annual assessment allows me to test myself against the goals set from the previous year and provides valuable feedback. To help me do this across the year the SAASfit Exercise Physiologist has regular communication with me to ensure my health and fitness is as the forefront of my mind.”

SAASfit participant – Bryan Ward

¹ SA Health Healthy Food and Drink Choices for Staff and Visitors in SA Health Facilities
<http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/5d68ac80465eee648649fe2e504170d4/HealthyFoodDrinkChoices-PHCS-HPB-1103.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=5d68ac80465eee648649fe2e504170d4>

² See SA Ambulance Strategic Plan: Vision 2015
http://www.saambulance.com.au/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=qsbpb_rCPGI%3d&tabid=120

Find out how you can create a healthy workplace, to contact a Healthy Worker Adviser for your sector, or to submit your own case study:

Healthy Workers Healthy Futures Initiative
www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/healthyworkers
Email: healthyworkers@health.sa.gov.au

