Annapolis wellness firm aims to cut down on sick days
Elite Movement Connections Center enters the wellness business to prevent workplace injuries, illnesses

A car accident and surgery pushed Carrol Redington into posture class. The Annapolis resident had been having problems with her back, and physical therapist Brenda Shaeffer told her about the sessions she ran at the Elite Movement Connections Center in Annapolis. There, Redington and other clients learned how their everyday behavior could impact their posture. Clients normally go to Elite for services, but now the company has launched a division — Ensure Productivity — that takes wellness programs to employers and their staffs.

Many workplace injuries “can be easily prevented by a little bit of education on how your body works or how easy the changes are to make to get healthy,” said Tim Shaeffer, director of operations at Ensure and founder Brenda Shaeffer’s son. “We developed a way for employers to provide
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Located off Harry S. Truman Parkway, Elite is made up of several different businesses geared toward health and wellness, including fitness, nutrition and mental skills training. Under the Ensure Productivity division, employers can have a program developed from one of the firms already existing within the Elite building. Programs can cost employers anywhere from $240 to $480 per year per employee.

Private industry employers reported roughly 3 million nonfatal workplace injuries and illnesses in 2013, the latest data available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In Maryland, that was an incidence rate of 3 cases per 100 full-time workers, which is lower than the national average of 3.3 cases.

Some employers take on wellness issues themselves. At Anne Arundel Medical Center, employees can choose from a variety of components, including smoking cessation, nutrition counseling and physical fitness. Buddy programs and peer support groups also are offered.

"We try to put out as many opportunities and options for our employees," said Abigail Nelson, who runs the hospital's wellness program, Energize. "Our goal as a health system is living healthier together. That starts with taking care of the community, but also taking care of ourselves.”

When signing up for a program through Ensure, officials meet with the human resources department of a prospective client. The client talks about the possible needs for employees, whether it be ergonomics, nutrition or something else. From there, Ensure officials develop a proposal designed for that business.

Richard Petitbon has been using the Ensure program for the 15 employees at his Crofton-based Petitbon Alarm Co. Petitbon signed up for ergonomic services, where desk workers learned better posture for their feet while sitting and technicians are taught the proper way to hold tools. Offering the program enabled the company to get a discount on health insurance.

"It literally is 25 things that you would never think made a big deal until you actually switch and say, 'Holy jeez, I can't believe I was doing that,'" Petitbon said. As a business owner "you're empowering your employees and showing them they need to take care of themselves and their families. When one spoke of the wheel isn't doing real well, it affects all spokes of the wheel.”

Back at posture class, Brenda Sheaffer uses a model of a spine to demonstrate how sitting or standing can improperly affect other joints and muscles. She reminds clients to STOP — Systematically Take time to Optimize your Posture.

"If you're not aligned (correctly), I guarantee I'll see you for more therapy," Sheaffer tells the class. "We keep doing the same thing and expecting different outcomes. And we all know what that is."

This rang true for Redington, who was among six students Sheaffer led through different poses.

"I'd been doing everything wrong," Redington said. "I hadn't been considering what I was doing with my body."