

## **Mercy General Hospital employees improve air quality, health through successful commuting alternatives program**

Thousands of hospital workers today are actively participating in environmental “green” efforts such as recycling and waste reduction, but rarely has one program truly paid them back in a more direct, personal way.

Sacramento, Calif., is one of the nation’s most expensive cities to drive in; an August 2007 article by *Forbes Magazine*, in fact, reported that Sacramento was among the country's biggest cities “where transportation eats up a fifth or more of household costs.”<sup>1</sup> In an area where gasoline is \$4.50 a gallon and climbing fast, area businesses are scrambling to seek alternatives.

At Mercy General Hospital, nearly one-quarter of the hospital’s 1,800 employees are now leaving their cars at home and are choosing public transportation and carpooling. But a growing number of them are now hoofing it to work on bicycles, confident they not only are doing their part to cut down on air pollution and noise, but also reaping a host of personal health benefits as well. And there’s one more dividend to Mercy’s efforts to get staff to ditch their cars: employees actually earn a host of benefits including free lunches and transportation subsidies (averaging \$65 a month per employee).

Director Of Guest Services Ron Kampling, who oversees Mercy’s “Commuting Options” program, is the poster child for the hospital’s burgeoning employee bicycling community. Back in 2006, Kampling ditched his car and began riding his bike to work. Approximately three days a week, Kampling hops on his bike for a 23-mile trek to Mercy, a trip that takes him about 90 minutes. (On the other days, he rides the train.) In May 2008 alone, he logged more than 950 miles.



**The Mercy Cycling Club boasts hundreds of hospital members, who meet regularly to provide resources and sponsor events that promote wellness and a healthy environment for Mercy employees and their families. To date, Club members have logged more than 140,000 miles commuting and more than 85,000 miles for fun.**

For Kampling, the additional time and effort pay enormous dividends, none the least of which is better health. In just under two years, he’s lost 35 pounds. “I started seeing additional benefits right off the bat,” said Kampling. “Now I’m combining my commute with my daily exercise program. Even

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<sup>1</sup> Forbes Magazine; August 2007; "America's Most Expensive Commutes"; based on a study by the Surface Transportation Policy Partnership, a nonprofit research firm, which draws on 2003 Bureau of Labor Statistics data, the most recent available. The study looked at annual transit costs such as gas and tolls, and public transit fare, as well as money spent on car payments and maintenance.

though it takes me 25 minutes longer than driving a car, I'm actually getting a vigorous workout."

There are financial rewards as well.

"When I ride my bike to work I get a free lunch voucher," he said. "If I ride the train or bus to work, I get an \$85 a month subsidy from the hospital. An average full-time employee who participates fully in the commuting program could receive approximately \$1,000 in subsidies per year."

Since the hospital's Commuting Options program began in 2006, the number of participants has more than doubled. And more than 35,000 automobile trips have been eliminated, equating to more than 30 tons of pollutants from the air. Kampling said his office fields five or more calls a day from Mercy employees interested in the commuting options program.

Even more compelling are the real savings to the hospital. For example, Kampling said Mercy would spend \$96,000 more annually if it had to lease off-site parking spaces for the employees who are using the commuting program.

Kampling said such trends demonstrate the success of its parent, Catholic Healthcare West (CHW), in imbuing environmental stewardship and employee wellness throughout the vast network of 41 hospitals. Earlier this year, CHW was recognized as one of the best places to work in the Sacramento area, a designation it has earned four years in a row, as well as national recognition for healthy environmental practices from Practice Greenhealth, a designation it has earned seven years in a row. Mercy General Hospital also has achieved an EPA designation as one of Sacramento Valley's best workplace for commuters.

"Back in 2006, we had a lot of discussions with our neighbors about the need to reduce traffic and noise, and that's when our program really took off," said Kampling, noting that Mercy is surrounded by a very affluent residential area in east Sacramento. "Not only is the program helping us meet state and federal air quality guidelines, but it's also helping us be a better neighbor to our community."

But Kampling said the true success of the program comes from the immediate impact that participants see and feel from the fruits of their efforts. "Environmental stewardship is one of CHW's core values, but this program goes beyond what we do within the four walls of our hospital," he said. "It's one thing to say our hospital is reducing or eliminating mercury, recycling paper and plastic, etc. It's another thing to see how environmental efforts can touch them on a personal level."

### **Commuting program benefits**

"We've taken exhausted measures to provide amenities to encourage the commuting program," said Kampling.

Indeed, the litany of incentives and benefits is impressive.

- Free transit passes – Mercy provides free light-rail and bus passes to employees who use commuter services offered by their community, a \$1,020 annual value.
- Carpool incentives – Employees who ride in a carpool receive free preferred parking and gas cards, a \$780 annual value.
- Meal vouchers – Employees who ride bikes or walk to work are eligible for \$4 free meal tickets for the hospital cafeteria, a \$1,056 annual value.
- Vanpool incentives – Mercy offers an \$85 subsidy to any employee joining a vanpool and commits to riding it at least 60% of the time they commute to work, a \$1,020 annual value.
- Guaranteed ride home – Free cab rides are available up to six times a year for employees who use commuting alternatives but miss their ride home due to working late.
- Commuter referral program – Any employee who refers another employee to the Commuting Options program receives a \$100 bonus.
- Commuter Club – The Mercy Commuter Club rewards employees for using other commuting options. Prizes are offered on a regular basis.
- Amenities – The hospital provides secure a bicycle cage, locker rooms, showers and dry-cleaning services.

Mercy also provides the Capital Cities Hospital Shuttle System, a free shuttle bus for employees, as well as community residents. “Visitors coming from outside the general area can use our free shuttle, and neighborhood residents can even jump on our shuttle to run errands or go shopping downtown,” Kampling said. In 2007, Mercy opened its shuttle to the public. In the spring of 2008, Mercy and two other local hospitals started working together and created a wide area shuttle network.



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### **The Cycling Club ‘culture’**

If the Mercy commuting options program was a hit, its bicycle commuting effort has been a home run, so much so that it has spawned quite a following among hospital employees.

Today, the Mercy Cycling Club boasts hundreds of hospital members, who meet regularly to provide resources and sponsor events that promote wellness and a healthy environment for Mercy employees and their families. The Club also competes regularly in local cycling events.

The mission of the Mercy Cycling Program is to improve employee health, decrease harmful pollutants in the air, and reduce traffic congestion. Activities also include events for all levels of riders, bike safety clinics, bike repair, and healthy biking.

To date, Club members have logged more than 140,000 miles commuting and more than 85,000 miles for fun. The Club recently logged over 14,000 miles during the Sacramento region's "Bike Month" event in May, placing eighth among 200 local clubs.

Kamplung attributes much of the Club's success to the mindset that tied the health benefits of riding with doing something environmentally sound. "Besides the commuting aspect and its impact on the environment, we've established a kind of culture around this," he said. "It was a leap for many folks just to abandon the habit of driving to work each day. Not everyone automatically jumps on their bikes and feels great about it. First they have to feel comfortable and safe, and then have fun. The Club atmosphere was instrumental in achieving that."

Moreover, Cycling Club members have also become health stewards in their own right.

The Club recently became stewards of the American River Parkway, a beautiful tree-lined 30-mile walk and bike path that connects several communities to Sacramento, and the stretch of land many take to work each day. The exit from the bike trail is only a mile from the hospital. In February 2008, the American River Parkway Foundation gave the Mercy Cycling Club stewardship of Mile 5 North of the parkway.

"The American River Parkway is a beautiful natural resource many have compared to Golden Gate Park and Central Park," Kamplung said.

Club members volunteer 20 hours per quarter by picking up trash and debris along the path, and sponsor events and rides along the parkway to support and raise awareness.

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