

# Wellness bill targets employee health

■ Knollenberg measure would reward employers for proactive approach

By Christy Strawser

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Working hard for your employer could take on new meaning if a bill proposed by U.S. Rep. Joe Knollenberg, R-Bloomfield Township, gets off the ground.

Knollenberg introduced a bill last week designed to encourage wellness programs in the workplace by framing the issue in language business owners understand—dollars and cents.

Called the Wellness and Prevention Act of 2007, the bill offers firms a \$200 tax credit for every one of their employees who participates in a wellness program that includes screenings for chronic diseases like heart disease and diabetes. Employees would have to attend educational seminars on healthy eating, exercise and managing stress.

To boost enrollment, employees who participate in the program would also get a \$200 personal tax credit that Knollenberg, an avid walker himself, believes that combined with the seminars would push Americans to take charge of their own health with mindful eating and regular exercise.

"An ounce of prevention is still worth a pound of cure," Knollenberg said. "We need to focus on preventing chronic diseases like cancer, diabetes and heart disease from happening in the first place."

Knollenberg said the bill is designed to empower companies to help workers take charge of their own health care and he believes it would lead to more affordable care overall. It's a problem many are trying to solve. The World Bank recently estimated 12 percent of health care costs in the United States pay for obesity-related problems.

Statistics from the American Heart Association show 65 percent of all people 20 and over, or 130 million Americans, are overweight or obese. And people who are overweight are more likely to have heart disease, a stroke or diabetes even if they have no other risk factors.

Critics of Knollenberg's bill believe the



Dick Hunt/Daily Tribune

**U.S. Rep. Joe Knollenberg has introduced a bill to encourage employers to focus on employees taking care of their own health. Regular exercise is a staple for regulars at the South Oakland Family YMCA where director Lynne Wilcox observes participants' progress.**

government should focus on making health care more affordable instead of creating something that could be perceived as making people feel guilty for their health problems.

David Pettit, spokesman for the Public Interest Research Group, a watchdog group based in Ann Arbor, said a better alternative to offset the health care cost crisis is the bill that passed the House of Representatives earlier this year that would allow Medicare to negotiate bulk pricing on prescriptions. Pettit said it will save tens of millions of dollars. The bill passed the House and is headed to the Senate. Knollenberg voted against it.

"Our bottom line message is that prevention programs are key for our country, but really this bill is just a hand-out for

businesses to do what they should already be doing," Pettit said. "There are already market incentives for employers to do this kind of program. If he really wanted to address the cost of health care, he would have voted for bulk purchasing."

Knollenberg said his wellness bill is vital, especially since the prospects of a comprehensive health care package passing in Congress are slim and his bill could realistically earn bipartisan support.

"We should not allow the perfect to be the enemy of the good. Health care is a complex and contentious issue," Knollenberg said. "There is a lot to be ironed out before a comprehensive compromise can be struck. My wellness bill is a good way to promote healthy living in the workplace and reduce the costs of health in-

surance for companies."

Daniel Zembrzuski, director of benefits for Corporate Human Resources of Beaumont Hospitals, said the bill is a good idea because statistics show a person's health improves if their employer provides financial incentive for a wellness program.

"We also know as a provider of health care services that health care costs increase due to the effects of smoking, obesity, lack of exercise and other poor health habits," Zembrzuski said. "I like the idea that it's a positive incentive to participate. It sets the right tone in the state of Michigan."

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