

This case study series aims to support City agencies to foster a [Culture of Health](#). Agency-specific worksite wellness programs, with strong leadership support, can have [broad impacts](#) for employees and agencies, including improved health & well-being, improved job satisfaction & retention, improved productivity, and reduced absenteeism.

Working Well at New York City's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

The New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) prioritizes worksite wellness and developed a wellness program to support the specific needs of OCME staff in partnership with WorkWell NYC, the City's workplace wellness program. The collaboration allows OCME to take responsibility for their wellness program, while WorkWell NYC remains available to provide advice and resources on an as needed basis.

With approximately 750 employees, OCME is the largest medical examiner's office in the U.S. Each year, OCME investigates approximately 8,500 deaths and tests tens of thousands of items of evidence.

How did OCME get started on their wellness program?

OCME's focus on wellness began in 2018, when the link between personnel issues and repeated staff exposure to stress and trauma became clear. [OCME executive leadership](#) acknowledged that workplace stress impacted staff's mental health, and that staff needed support to recognize and address these challenges. During the COVID-19 pandemic, staff worked 12-hour days (and longer) and saw an unprecedented volume of death. In response, OCME leadership hosted a workshop on wellness priorities and hired a consultant who conducted surveys to determine the needs and preferences for an employee wellness program.

"From a mental wellness standpoint, our staff deal with some very traumatic cases.... It can really take a mental toll. Vicarious trauma is very real. So, having mental wellness outlets for staff is really important." - OCME staff member

The wellness program continues to grow and is now guided by an active wellness committee and a dedicated, full-time wellness coordinator.

What led to the success of OCME's wellness program?

OCME built an innovative, sustainable model by taking action towards the eight [Culture of Health principles](#).

1. Visible commitment of organizational leaders

The OCME leadership team demonstrates their commitment to the wellness program by:

- funding wellness activities
- allowing time for staff to work on and participate in wellness activities

- promoting and participating in wellness activities
- providing a simple and quick approval process for the wellness committee to move activities forward

In addition, leadership's trust in the wellness committee helps OCME succeed with their wellness goals.

"The management was asked early on, regardless of what our own feelings or opinions were about it, or whether we felt we needed it personally, to make an effort to participate. And to show employees that they could and should take time out of the workday to do these things and take advantage of them." - OCME staff member

2. Dedicated team of managers, union representatives, and workers collaboratively developing, implementing, and evaluating wellness programming

The OCME staff tasked with developing the wellness program partnered with WorkWell NYC early on. WorkWell NYC provided resources and support to tailor the wellness program to OCME staff and create a wellness committee to move the program forward.

OCME formed a wellness committee that now is the heart of their wellness program. Significant efforts were made to ensure staff representation on the committee from across OCME departments and of all staff with a clear interest in wellness. The committee is made up of two teams that work together to move the wellness program forward: a core group of [Ambassadors and Champions](#) that meet weekly, and a larger group that meets monthly. Key elements of the success of the OCME wellness committee include:

- staff representation from different departments
- openness to all staff with the opportunity to bring a range of ideas for consideration
- support of executive leadership

One example of the success of this model is an employee proposal to the wellness committee that is now among the topmost engaging OCME wellness activities. The Sweetgreen Outpost was presented as an opportunity to bring healthy food options to an OCME work location and allows staff to enjoy their entire lunch hour as opposed to losing half the time walking to get their meal.

"[In the beginning] it was a loose group of people trying their best to figure out how to direct ourselves and what we needed to do, trying to find resources. But then we started to partner with WorkWell [NYC], which really changed the focus, and our programming availability—from researching what we could do, what we should do, to actually providing programs and wellness options to the actual employees. So, working with WorkWell has really revolutionized what we were able to do here." - OCME staff member

3. Data-driven strategy built on workplace health assessment

The OCME wellness committee conducted an assessment survey and several interviews to understand staff wellness needs including the mental health needs that were exacerbated due to the COVID-19

pandemic. Staff feedback was incorporated in their pilot programs. Now, annual all-staff wellness surveys include questions on staff needs and preferences. This data is reviewed, analyzed, and used to further develop the wellness program.

“I think that the wellness program seeks to incorporate people from every one of these sections of the agency so they can get a broad understanding of what each section is going to be dealing with. People who are going to death scenes have a whole different set of mental wellness requirements than, say, the histology laboratory analysts. The wellness program committee is very good at pulling [from] the different resources of the agency to understand what the needs of each of the different agency sections are.”
– OCME staff member

4. Operating plan that includes program and implementation planning and management

The OCME wellness committee develops a yearly work plan and uses program management tools to maintain organization. OCME includes in its yearly plan both annual events, like the international health fair and art auction, and new program ideas that emerge.

5. Comprehensive, varied, integrated programs and activities

OCME implements a broad range of wellness activities including but not limited to:

- art
- blood pressure screening
- ergonomics
- flu shots
- line dancing
- mindfulness and meditation
- nutrition and hydration
- scavenger hunts
- self-defense
- step challenges
- therapy dogs
- yoga

Activities have a strong, but not exclusive, emphasis on mental wellbeing. Some activities have an explicit mental health focus like Mental Health First Aid addressing mental health stigma, while other activities give staff a break from the trauma they are exposed to within their work like therapy dogs. Activities are created by OCME staff and selected by OCME among programs available through the NYC Employee Assistance Program (EAP), the NYC Health Department, and WorkWell NYC.

“The same people don’t participate in everything, which is why it’s important to have a lot of variety, right? The people that are interested in self-defense class may not be the same people that are interested in meditation. Although some people try to do everything, a lot of people pick and choose what they’re interested in. Like a cat person isn’t going to go down and get comfort from a

therapy dog. And so, it's important to have variety." – OCME staff member

6. Policies and practices that support workplace wellness goals

OCME adopted several policies and practices to support their wellness goals including:

- funding for the wellness program
- regular communication with employees regarding health and wellbeing
- community building events
- overall prioritization of wellness to cultivate a culture of health
- development of specific programs to engage staff at smaller offices and/or with less flexible schedules

"We are operational, so it's difficult, but we try our best to also give [staff] time to participate ... People who show an interest, we really try our best to negotiate the schedule and ensure that there's coverage so that people can participate where possible. And again, it is difficult to participate in agency-wide events and citywide events because of the duties of an operational department, which is why we do our own [events] also [within] individual departments, because we can tailor it specifically to our needs because of what it is that we do." – OCME staff member

7. Strategic communications

Communications methods used to inform OCME staff about wellness activities and motivate them to participate include:

- e-newsletters on wellness information and upcoming activities
- postings on curated bulletin boards
- word of mouth

Managers are not only encouraged to support participation of their staff, but also set an example by participating in wellness activities themselves.

"I gave them each a roll [of bulletin board paper], the bulletin board, the borders, and said 'Anytime something comes out in the WorkWell [NYC] email that you think will be great for staff please print out the poster, put it up on the board and let people know it's going [on].' We also recruited a member for each borough to be our wellness person, who is responsible for keeping the board up and adding stuff to it." – OCME staff member

8. Evaluation that determines impact and allows for program refinement

The OCME wellness committee conducts annual all-staff surveys to solicit feedback on activities and identify areas for improvement. The feedback helps to ensure that the interests of different departments and sections are represented and to learn from past successes and challenges.

"We are actually a leader in this field, and I would like to continue that. The only way to continue it is to have the research that backs

it so I can look at research papers where it supports this idea, but we also need to support it with [our] data.” – OCME staff member

What are some challenges faced by the OCME wellness program?

Challenge: Limited access to wellness activities for staff at smaller worksites and with inflexible schedules and assignments (e.g. nighttime shifts).

Lesson Learned: Vary the times and places that wellness activities are offered and promote online and recorded programs to improve access to wellness activities. WorkWell NYC has many [recorded programs](#) that can be easily promoted.

Challenge: Managers’ concerns about productivity discourages staff participation in wellness activities.

Lesson Learned: Executive leadership needs to consistently encourage middle management to support staff participation in wellness activities and encourage managers to strategize ways to meet the dual priorities of productivity and wellness.

Challenge: Although the wellness program is now part of the culture at OCME, sustainability was a concern since OCME staff work on the wellness program in addition to their other job responsibilities.

Lesson Learned: Dedicated staff with job responsibilities specifically focused on the wellness program is necessary to sustain the program over time. OCME was first able to hire a dedicated intern and then, promoting from within, they were able to fund a full-time position focused on the wellness program.

What do staff say about OCME’s wellness program?

OCME staff appreciate the support provided by the OCME wellness program and the variety of activities. Below are direct quotes from the OCME all-staff survey conducted December 2023 - January 2024.

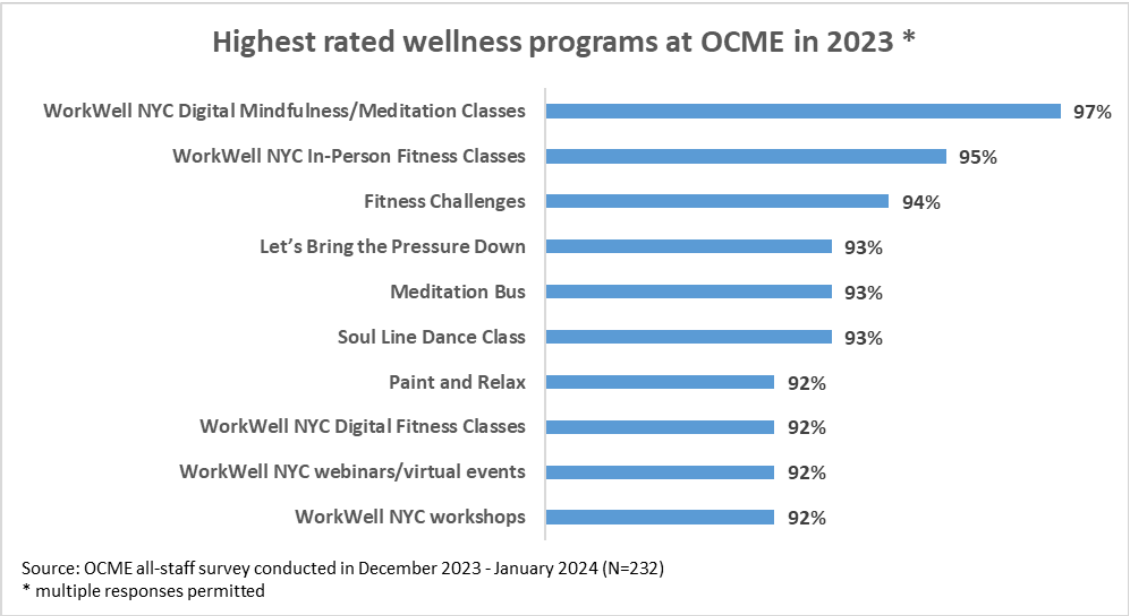
“I think OCME does a great job offering a mini respite to its employees. It is a pleasure to work on-site and be able to participate in these lovely, restorative, events.”

“Though I did not participate in any of the activities last calendar year (mostly time conflicts), I value the opportunities and hope these wellness programs continue.”

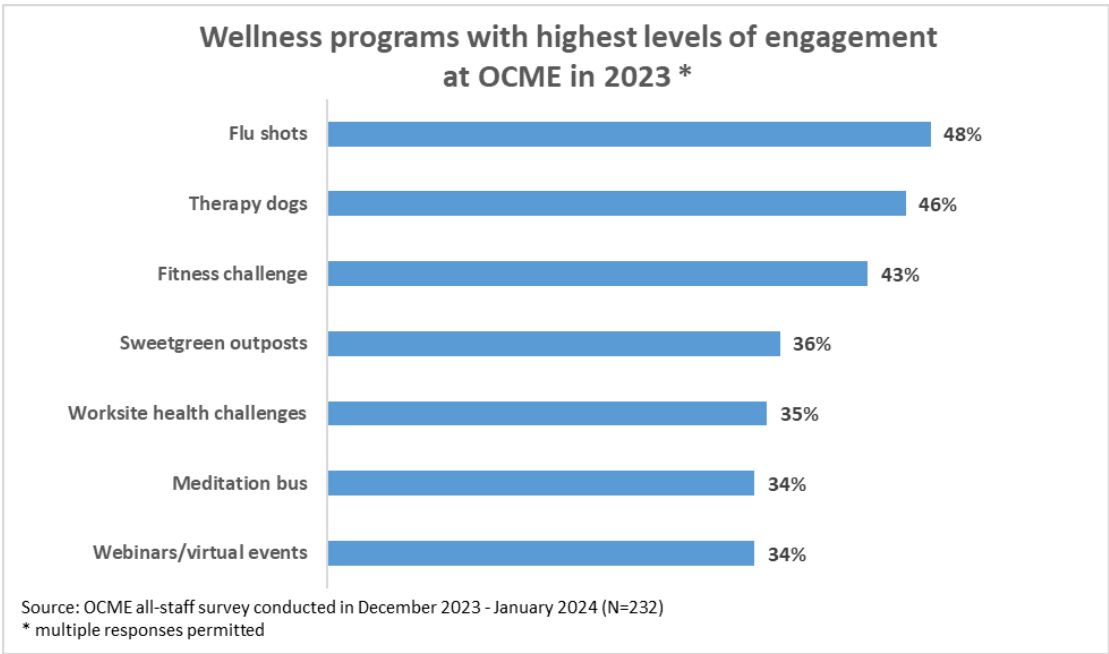
“I like the in-person food demonstration/salad preparation class. I believe it is a way for employees to get to know each other and keep good health by learning how to cook.”

“The program and course offerings are expansive and quite timely. Well Done.”

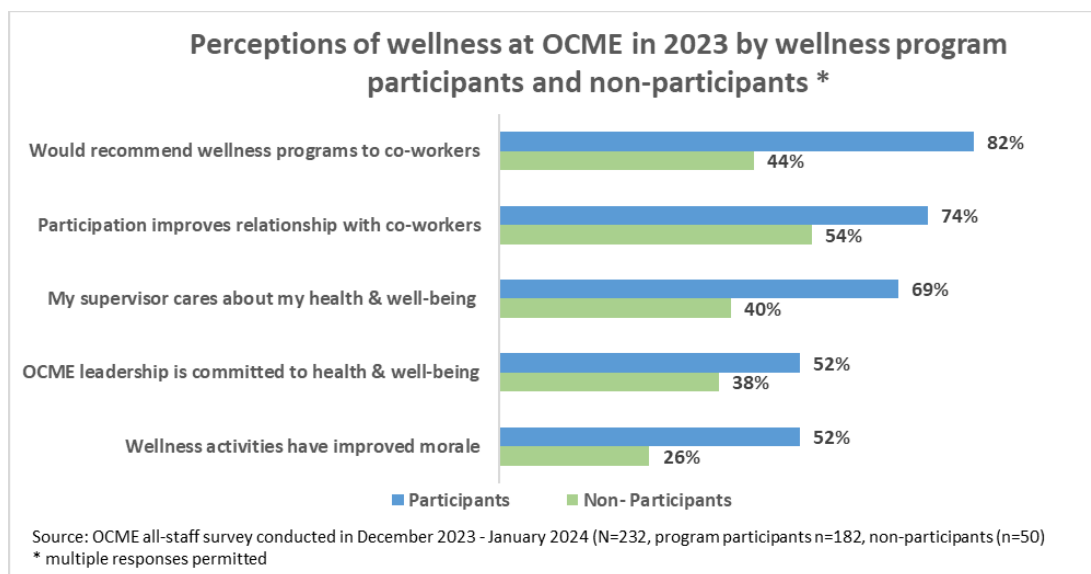
The data in the figures below are from the OCME all-staff survey conducted in December 2023 - January 2024.



Graph 1 summary: This graph shows the highest rated wellness activities in OCME’s wellness program. The top three are WorkWell NYC Digital Mindfulness/Meditation Classes (97% rated highly), WorkWell NYC In-Person Fitness Classes (95% rated highly), and Fitness Challenges (94% rated highly).



Graph 2 summary: This graph shows wellness activities with the most participation at OCME. The top 7 are free Flu shots (48%), Therapy dogs (46%), Fitness challenges (43%), Sweetgreen Outposts (36%), Worksite health challenges (35%), Meditation bus (34%), and WorkWell NYC Webinars/Virtual Events (34%).



Graph 3 summary: This graph shows perceptions of wellness at OCME among staff that are wellness program participants (in blue) and non-participants (in green). A high percentage of participants said they would recommend the wellness program (82%) and believe that participation in wellness activities improves relationships with co-workers (74%) and that their supervisor cares about their health and wellbeing (69%). About half of the participants believe that wellness activities have improved employee morale and OCME's leadership is committed to employees' health and wellbeing. Non-participants also recognize benefits of the wellness program but at a lower level.

This case study was prepared in 2024 by Foram Jasani, Sheaba Daniel and Linda Weiss of the Center for Evaluation and Applied Research at the New York Academy of Medicine through a collaboration with NYC OCME and WorkWell NYC.

To learn more about a Culture of Health and developing your agency worksite wellness program, visit on.nyc.gov/cultureofhealth.