

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 Department of Social Services

The [New York City Department of Social Services](#) (DSS) prioritizes worksite wellness. In partnership with WorkWell NYC, the City's workplace wellness program, DSS developed a wellness initiative to support agency staff. The collaboration allows DSS to take responsibility for their wellness program, while WorkWell NYC remains available to provide advice and resources on an as-needed basis.

With approximately 13,000 employees, DSS houses the administrative units of the NYC Human Resources Administration (HRA) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS).

- HRA is the nation's largest social services agency and assists over three million low-income and vulnerable New Yorkers annually through the administration of more than 15 public benefits programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Emergency Rental Assistance, and Adult Protective Services.
- The Department of Homeless Services (DHS) provides temporary emergency shelter to New Yorkers in need, and helps individuals and families transition into permanent housing and build self-sufficiency.

How did DSS start their wellness program?

DSS began offering wellness activities to employees in 2015 through an existing collaboration with the Mount Sinai Health System. The first activity was a health fair, followed by on-site "Lunch and Learns," which continue to this day. When WorkWell NYC was launched, DSS wanted to ensure they would be able to fully participate. They initially thought a program could be implemented without a paid position but quickly realized a staff person was essential to serve an agency of this size.

A wellness coordinator was hired and served for a few years and retired prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, there was a temporary hiatus in program activities. In 2023, the program was re-instituted and took its current form. This included hiring a new Lead Wellness Coordinator, reporting up to a Deputy Commissioner, and the rebranding the wellness program as DSS Wellness.

What led to the success of the DSS wellness program?

DSS built a responsive, sustainable model by taking action towards the eight Culture of Health principles.

1. *Visible commitment of organizational leaders*

Leadership at DSS demonstrate their commitment to wellness by:

- Securing funding for a staff position to direct the wellness program
- Facilitating access to funds for participant incentives
- Promoting engagement in wellness program activities to reduce resistance from staff
- Allowing staff time for participation in the wellness program

"We are very fortunate that our Commissioner has been very instrumental in [promoting] our wellness programs and services. Initially, there was pushback in some of our client-facing areas, but when your Commissioner talks about the importance of health and wellness programs, then it makes it a little easier to promote and have staff participation." - DSS staff member

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

Given the size of DSS, the development and implementation of a wellness program requires a team, which currently includes a full-time Lead Wellness Coordinator, as well as a large network of Ambassadors and Champions, who volunteer their expertise, time, energy and time to meet with the Lead Wellness Coordinator monthly. During monthly meetings, the Lead Wellness Coordinator provides wellness event updates and brainstorms future events with the Ambassadors. Ambassadors and Champions, based in different locations and departments, address the onsite logistics of program implementation, solicit input and feedback from colleagues and other staff, and promote wellness activities through personal outreach and connections.

WorkWell NYC staff and external collaborators like Mount Sinai Health System also support the development, implementation, and evaluation of the wellness program. For example, DSS Wellness, in collaboration with leadership from Mount Sinai Health Systems' Governmental Affairs office, were able to implement three health fairs for DSS staff, and develop health related Healthy Hour Presentations ("Lunch & Learns").

"We have 33 Ambassadors, and 26 Champions, from 19 locations , and [the Lead Wellness Coordinator] works alongside them, as WorkWell [NYC] works with [the Lead Wellness Coordinator], in providing some services that can be shared with the Ambassadors to bring to their locations – on top of other ideas that we come up on our own... [The Lead Wellness Coordinator] meets with the Ambassadors every month and talks about what's to come for the following month." - DSS staff member

"We were able to work with the Mount Sinai Health Systems Governmental Affairs office, and we were able to develop health related "Lunch and Learns" on various topics; and it was great working with Mount Sinai. And we continue to work with them, because what they would do is—we would identify a topic, and then they would find a medical professional that would speak to that specific topic." - DSS staff member

Although a team was considered essential, the personal qualities of particular individuals—including their dedication and skills—were also emphasized.

"Without these two [wellness staff] people, this agency [of 13,000 people] would not have a wellness program. And I think that's pretty remarkable given the scope and breadth...I understand [my colleague] is going to talk about the work of the Ambassadors, but if we don't have people leading and organizing and promoting and championing—so, I would say, to me, that is the agency's biggest accomplishment. Look at what we're doing with basically limited resources." - DSS staff member

3. Data-driven strategy built on workplace health assessment

The DSS Wellness team surveys the staff after activities to assess their experience and other program interests. They also developed a DSS Wellness agency-wide Survey to assess topics of interest, and implementation details like mode of delivery, timing, and what prevents them from participating in current wellness events. Results are shared with Ambassadors to guide future program planning.

"We have been trying to survey our staff especially after a [wellness] event or workshop that we do. ...if they're interested in workshops or webinars, challenges... And then I have a survey running for this year... I shared with the Ambassadors so they know what their locations are interested in, based off the survey answers. It's a basic survey, nothing complicated... are they interested in nutrition, stress management, mental health, walking challenges? Are they interested in morning, afternoon, or after work hours type of programming?" - DSS staff member

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

The DSS Wellness team develops a written plan with monthly updates. Although the plan is helpful for implementation and promotion of activities, it is not rigid, as flexibility for other needs that arise is also considered essential.

"We write a six-months to a year plan, and we provide reporting [to WorkWell NYC] every month on what we have done for the previous month... It's preplanning, but if things change, we just change as needed, because things happen. Other things come up, but we usually try to plan one or two activities a month." - DSS staff member

5. Comprehensive, varied, integrated programs and activities

DSS Wellness distributes a monthly newsletter and—through collaborations with WorkWell NYC, other city agencies, and outside partners—offers a broad range of activities, including but not limited to:

- Caregiver services and resources
- Chair yoga
- Cooking demonstrations
- Diabetes education
- Financial wellness workshops
- Flu shots
- Grief, loss and bereavement
- Hydration stations
- Hypertension education
- Low-impact exercise
- Meditation
- Prostate cancer screening
- Retirement planning
- Stress management

As explained by DSS Wellness staff:

"May is Mental Health Awareness Month, we coordinate with EAP [NYC Employee Assistance Program] to come over and talk about mental health with our staff. Other locations [collaborate with Mount Sinai] for colon, prostate cancer [awareness]; they did prostate cancer screening during March. Sometimes in August we do grief and bereavement [education]...So, we plan around things that people are interested in. I know there was a lot of demand for nutrition, so [we made] sure we're having a nutrition workshop [with Mount Sinai]." - DSS staff member

6. Policies and practices that support workplace wellness goals

DSS Wellness staff recognized the importance of policies and practices that support workplace wellness goals. Challenges to implementing such policies include the demands of their jobs and fiscal constraints. Successes include funding and relationships with other agencies and external collaborators for the wellness program, allowing staff to work on and participate in wellness activities, and the development and implementation of activities that are available to those working outside of regular business hours, in remote locations, and with little time for breaks.

"When certain programs become overwhelmed with work, it does become all about the work. So, how do we deal with that? Even in

those moments, you probably can find a few minutes just to take a deep breath. But I think this is becoming increasingly challenging for all City agencies, because every City agency is doing more with less." - DSS staff member

7. Strategic communications

DSS Wellness staff prioritizes effective communication. DSS branded their program early on, including a logo designed by their Communications Department. They use multiple modes for communication, including:

- A monthly newsletter
- Email
- Program brochures
- Flyers with program descriptions and QR codes, hyperlinks, and/or contact email addresses for registration.

"We are very on top of marketing, and we're trying to do as much as we can, whether it's by email communication, poster boards, flyers. We send flyers to locations that do not have color printers, because sometimes flyers look so much better in color. We prepare a newsletter every month that we work with Communications Department in our agency to format and clean it up and send it out to all agency staff." - DSS staff member

8. Evaluation that determines impact and allows for program refinement

As described above, DSS Wellness regularly surveys program participants and has launched a general survey to assess interest areas and preferred modes of delivery. Registration and attendance sheets are maintained to assess levels of engagement.

"If we did a Relaxation Station, [the survey asks] "How did you find it? Did you find this useful? Would you want to do this again?" So that way we know if people enjoyed this type of activity and if the demand for this is there." - DSS staff member

What are some challenges faced by the DSS wellness program?

Challenge: Limited time to engage in wellness activities given job responsibilities and the vulnerable populations that DSS serves.

Lesson Learned: Vary the times and places that wellness activities are offered and promote online and recorded sessions to improve access. Offering activities of different lengths, as well as resources (e.g., “hydration stations”) that staff can quickly access, facilitates engagement.

Challenge: Recruiting Ambassadors and Champions to facilitate program growth.

Lesson Learned: Convene a recruitment drive event, providing information on WorkWell NYC, program expectations, and lunch. Emphasize that Ambassador and Champion responsibilities need not be time consuming and can offer organizational and personal benefits (e.g., development of leadership skills).

What do staff say about DSS's wellness program?

Staff appreciate the support provided by DSS Wellness. Below are direct quotes from the DSS Wellness Survey of all agency staff conducted from March to May 2025.

“If I remember correctly, this program was implemented during COVID, and it has been a blessing. The DSS Wellness program has provided great tips and resources throughout the years so that we can improve our quality of life. In my opinion, it has worked. Even if only one person has benefitted, I would call it a success. However, I'm sure that number is far greater than that!”

“Being a part of an agency that the focus is primarily on the public of NYC, it feels amazing to have a program like this that the focus is on the “wellness” of its staff. I have personally participated in a few of the events that the program has offered that has given me a refreshing start to my in-office work week, or revitalizing feeling to finish out my day. The program has definitely been a great addition to what could just be another mundane work schedule.”

“I love the program. People have to remember that as you serve the public, you cannot neglect taking care of yourself. The wellness program gives that to DSS staff.”

“I absolutely love the program. I love the resources and options given to assist others in a healthy lifestyle.”

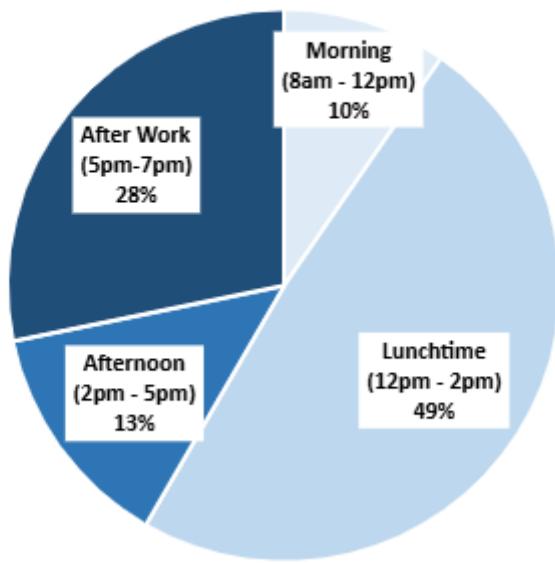
"I enjoy it and am glad that it is offered in HRA. Looking forward to future events that I will be able to participate."

"It's an excellent program offered to staff! Health is wealth!"

"It is a good program, and I have learned a lot."

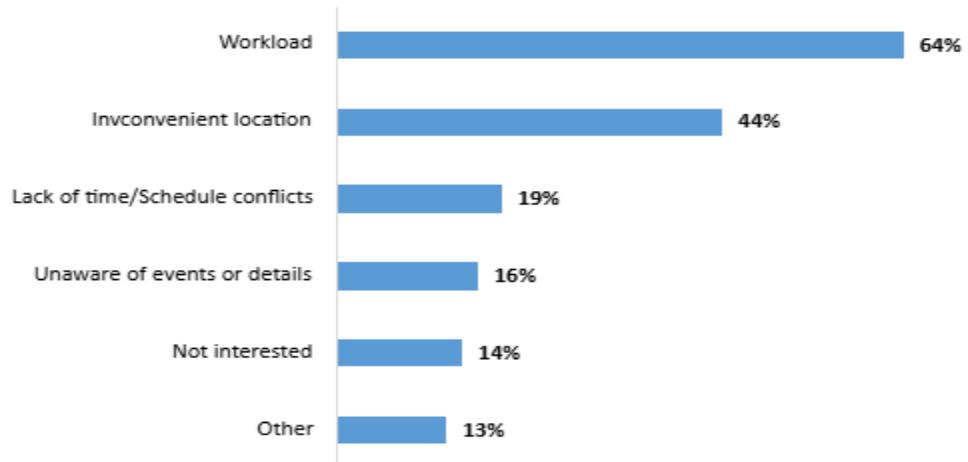
The data in the figures below are from the DSS Wellness Survey of all agency staff conducted from March to May 2025. (N=112)

Time Preference for Wellness Activities

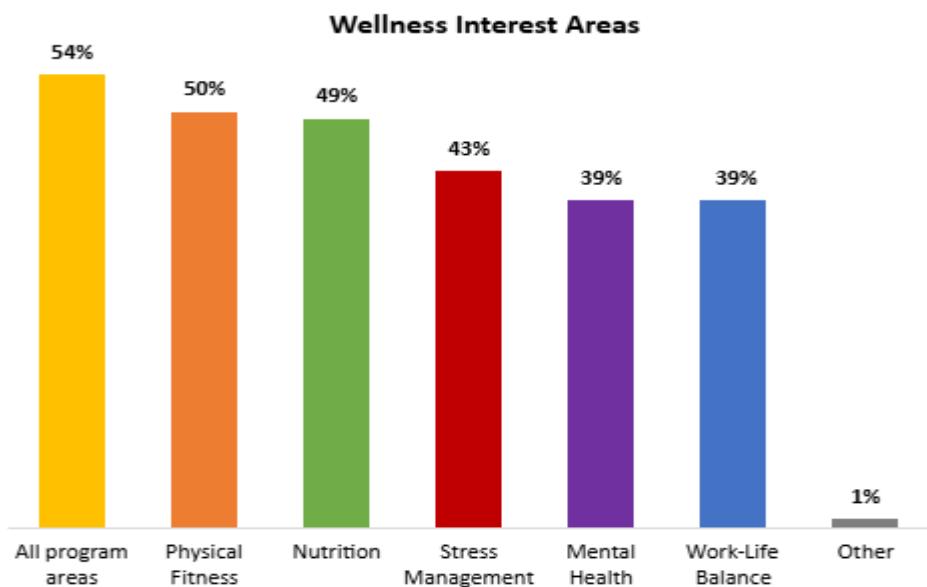


Graph 1 Summary: 49% of staff preferred lunchtime activities (12-2pm), followed by 28% of staff preferring after work or later shift events (5-7pm).

Barriers in Participating in Wellness Activities

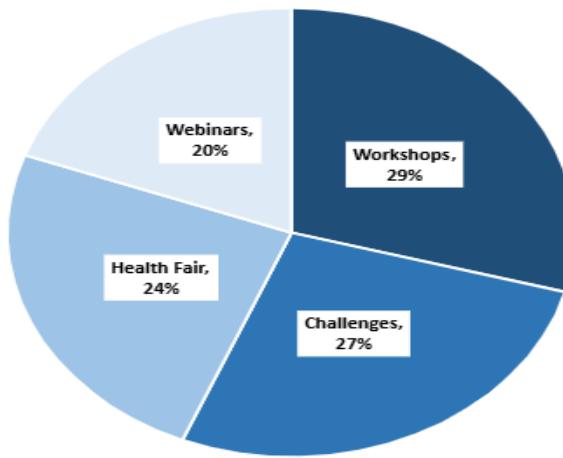


Graph 2 Summary: The top three obstacles that staff reported prevent them from participating in agency's wellness events were lack of time/schedule conflicts (19%), inconvenient location (64%), and being unaware of events or details (16%).



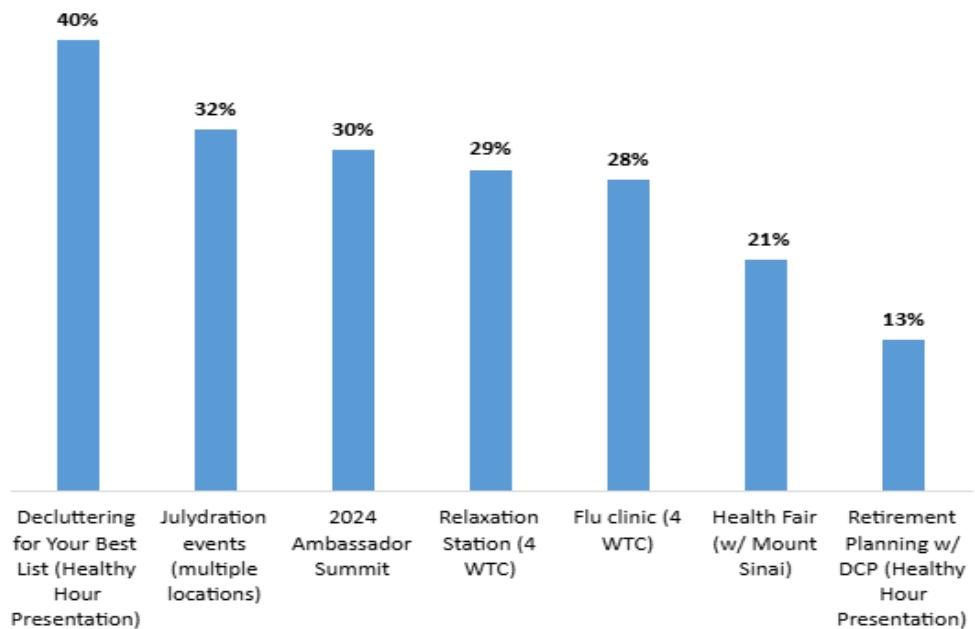
Graph 3 Summary: Staff reported physical fitness (50%), nutrition (49%), and stress management (43%) as their top three areas of interest, followed closely by mental health (39%) and work-life balance (39%).

Staff Interest in Wellness Programs



Graph 4 Summary: Staff reported being most interested in workshops (29%), challenges (27%), and health fairs (24%) for wellness programs.

Wellness Activity Participation



Graph 5 Summary: The 2024 wellness activities with the highest participation rates were Decluttering for Your Best Life (40%), Julydration (32%), and the 2024 WorkWell NYC Ambassador Summit (30%).

Captured below are snapshots of DSS Wellness programming in action, showcasing the creativity, camaraderie, and energy that drive our commitment to staff well-being.



- Picture 1 (Top Left): Cooking Demonstration Workshop
- Picture 2 (Top Right): Chair Yoga Worksit Fitness Class
- Picture 3 (Middle Left): Relaxation/Meditation Station
- Picture 4 (Middle Right -top): Prostate Cancer Screening bus
- Picture 5 (Middle Right-bottom): Vision Board Making Workshop
- Picture 6 (Bottom Left-top): SoundBath Seated Workshop
- Picture 7 (Bottom Left-bottom): Ergonomics 101 Workshop
- Picture 8 (Bottom Right): 90s Dance Worksit Fitness Class

This case study was prepared in 2025 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 Department of Social Services and WorkWell NYC.

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

Want to set next steps for wellness at your agency? Complete the Culture of Health Planning tool (COH). Use the tool to identify key strategies to improve employee health and well-being. Once submitted to us, you will receive a report with the results and guidance to set goals for your agency's wellness program.