



Pictured left to right, back row: Cheri Miller, director; Amy Wourms, registered dietician; and Mike Shaw, client coordinator. **Front row:** Amy Mechley, medical director and Sara Custer, client coordinator

Building a Healthier Workforce

Written by D. Allen
Photography by Brian Ambs

Ask Dr. Amy Mechley, medical director of The Christ Hospital's Wellness Division, to describe the Complete Health Improvement Program (CHIP) and she'll start by telling you that it's a lifestyle change, not a diet. For 25 years, CHIP has created measurable, consistent health improvements in the lives of more than 55,000 participants worldwide, and Dr. Mechley's leadership at The Christ Hospital has brought the program to Cincinnati's corporate employees and community members alike. After participating in the program with his wife and experiencing results that were "beyond belief," Wick Ach, CEO of Hixson Architecture, Engineering, Interiors, partnered with the Christ Hospital Health Network's wellness team to bring the program to Hixson associates.



Amy Mechley, medical director of The Christ Hospital, Wellness Division



For a workshop on Heart Disease and Diabetes, CHIP participants at Hixson sampled a lentil shepherd's pie made by Garnish Catering.



Sara Custer, Client Coordinator, leads a CHIP meeting at Hixson.



Mark Frey, senior vice president at Hixson Architecture, Engineering, Interiors

CHIP is one of many workforce wellness services offered by the Christ Hospital Health Network. At the beginning of each session, a member of the hospital's Wellness Division testing each person's cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and other health indicators. "Weight loss is a great side effect (of the program)," Dr. Mechley said. "But you can't look at somebody and see that they have dangerous cholesterol, or that their blood pressure is too high." Individuals' levels are measured again at the end of each nine-week program, and the changes are positive and dramatic for many.

When Christ Hospital measured participants' levels before and after CHIP, the results showed a 12.6% average decrease in LDL cholesterol levels, an 11% average decrease in triglyceride levels, a 5% average decrease in glucose levels, a lower resting heart rate by 5% on average, and an average loss of 11 pounds over the course of two months. In addition to these compelling changes, the program gives participants the community support, medical oversight, and lifestyle tools they need to improve eating habits, exercise routines, and other behavior.

Hixson employees gather with health and wellness coach Sara Custer once a week to discuss a specific wellness topic, watch a 25-minute educational video, taste samples of a healthy dish, and participate in an activity and Q&A session. For example, during a Monday night workshop in February, the group focused on heart disease and diabetes. Garnish Catering, which provides food for CHIP meetings at Hixson, made a lentil shepherd's pie for the occasion, and Custer led the group in a recipe make-over activity and a discussion about how to choose healthy meals when dining out.

"It's not a diet," Ach says. "With diets, you lose a bunch of weight and over time you gain it back. It's depressing. This is a lifestyle, teaching you why it's so important to learn about what you eat, what you're putting inside your body." CHIP educates participants about the importance of plant-based whole foods, but it is not a vegetarian or vegan diet, nor is it an all-or-nothing approach. "At the beginning (of the program) they had a scale; picture a scale that goes from left to right," Ach says. "On the top left (are) people who only eat fatty foods, red meats, etc., and

on the bottom right is people who only eat fruits and nuts. What they're trying to do is pull you into the middle."

Since Hixson began offering voluntary CHIP workshops to employees in 2013, three groups of 10 associates have gone through the program. However, each session has 20 participants: 10 employees joined by their spouses or partners. Encouraging individuals to make lifestyle changes with the support and partnership of their significant others was Ach's idea. Those who go through the sessions with a family member are more likely to make sustainable, long-term health improvements, and the program can also be a bonding experience for couples.

Senior Vice President Mark Frey participated in a CHIP session from September to November. "I couldn't imagine doing this by yourself without your spouse or significant other," he says. "Living within the guidelines of the program can be challenging at times. You're looking for different ingredients, things are in different places in the grocery store, and if you're going out to eat ... it's so much easier to eat what is offered on the menu." Frey attended the CHIP workshop with his partner, Jennifer, which he says made a huge difference. "You're in it together," he says, "you support each other to make better choices."

By combining a diet of colorful fruits, leafy vegetables, beans, grains, and legumes with lifestyle changes that include regular exercise, sunshine, positive relationships, and adequate quiet time, participants have lowered the risk or effects of heart disease, diabetes, chronic illness, cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, and other conditions.

Aside from creating healthy families and a healthier workforce, CHIP addresses some of the current healthcare challenges that many individuals and employers face. This program is part of the future of healthcare, says Dr. Mechley, because it focuses on improving the health of the general population, rather than just shifting costs from one arena to another. "We're seeing the shifts now," she says. "The healthcare and insurance industry is shifting some responsibility to providers."

A company like Hixson provides health coverage for more than 300 lives through its self-insured plan. This means that the company is directly responsible for the costs of its employees and their families, rather than relying on a commercial insurance company or HMO to provide benefits. Hixson offers optional programs like CHIP to support its workforce and ensure that employees are happy and healthy, while also recognizing that the types of lifestyle improvements that result can lower the company's healthcare expenses. "The key, when it comes to corporations," says Dr. Mechley, "is that when you align financial stability with the right thing to do, that's sustainable." Though CHIP is an initial investment, the long-term

benefits for individuals and organizations outweigh the upfront cost of the program.

"We need to engage our patients in becoming healthier, and it's not all (about) knowledge," says Dr. Mechley. "When someone knows what they should do, it's still tricky to get that bridge, to say, 'I'm going to change my behaviors to be consistent with what I know.' This program gives you that bridge. It's the bridge between 'I want to be there' and 'I am successful there.' That's why it needs to be an immersion program... You're not going away to a program where somebody can cook for you or make you go work out. You are actually immersed in your own life, making these behavioral changes supported by a group and backed by medical knowledge and medical oversight."

Ultimately, CHIP provides a support network and an educational framework that can move individuals towards healthier living, but it is up to each person to make the changes they want to see in their lives. "Everything about this program is choices; it is not dogmatic," Frey said. "Am I going to eat this, or am I going to eat that? Am I going to walk this morning, or am I going to stay in bed? The better the choice, the better you feel." At Hixson, those currently participating in the program now have the support of other co-workers who are CHIP alumni. "A year ago, if I had come into the office and said, 'I'm going to begin living a healthier lifestyle,' I would have been looked at in an odd way," Frey says. "Now, there are 30-some people who have done it and everybody knows about it."

Studies have shown CHIP's tangible benefits, such as weight loss, lower levels of bad cholesterol, and disease reversal, but other effects are more difficult to quantify. Dr. Mechley reflected on the feedback she's received from patients: "I've had people saying, 'I've never slept better in 20 years,' 'I'm enjoying my spouse more,' 'I'm playing with my grandkids,' 'I have energy.' Those are the things you can't quite measure."

The Christ Hospital Health Network is located at 2139 Auburn Avenue, Cincinnati, OH 45219. For more information about the Wellness Division and CHIP, call 513.263.8699, email workforcewellness@thechristhospital.com, or visit www.thechristhospital.com.