

## **Palestine Enters Deal with YMCA**

### **Move Meant To Promote Health of City Workers**

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Staff Writer

PALESTINE - This town's 180 full-time, permanent employees can work out in an exercise room or take advantage of many other fitness amenities at YMCA of Palestine at no cost to them - it's paid by the city instead.

Effective at the start of the New Year, the city of Palestine has purchased membership in the YMCA, a non-profit community social service agency, for all city employees to participate in a fitness program at the YMCA.

"I think it's great because we are here to serve," said Michael J. Oranch, chief executive officer for YMCA of Palestine.

The move is aimed at making employees healthier, which in turn is expected to reduce health insurance claims, said Robert T. Pennington, city finance director.

The agreement between the city and YMCA is for one year. "This is a standard corporate agreement throughout YMCAs and businesses or entities throughout the U.S.," said Oranch, who called the city's action as "progressive."

The city has become a corporate partner member of the YMCA in exchange for a membership discount rate for city workers. The cost to the city is \$35,000, paid upfront.

That's a \$38,800 discount from normal costs, which would have totaled \$73,800 if the city and YMCA had not reached agreement on the discounted rate.

"With this program, the city desires to accomplish a long-term reduction in health insurance claims that can be prevented with a healthy and active lifestyle," Pennington said.

"The annual cost in providing this benefit is way less than half the cost of a typical major insurance claim," Pennington pointed out, noting that several major claims a year in the city's self-insurance program total more than \$100,000.

"Giving employees the opportunity and tools to combat preventable chronic illnesses should save the city hundreds of thousands of dollars," Pennington predicted. "It is widely proven that employer fitness programs help employees stay healthy and have a direct effect on wellness, productivity and stress management," he added.

The discounted membership rate granted the city, Oranch said, is "our way of helping the people that help our city - our city police, our fire department, our water department, the people that maintain our streets, just everything."

The city council approved the agreement Dec. 14 and Monday will be the first day city workers can take advantage of the YMCA's fitness program. At the end of the term, the

city intends to evaluate participation of employees in the program to assess whether it's worthwhile to continue it, Pennington said.

The YMCA is about to enter a different partnership agreement with the Anderson County sheriff's department for its 80 employees. It is expected to be finalized early in the New Year. The sheriff's department will get a discount on YMCA membership fees, too.

"We are doing it (providing the discount) because they are our sheriff's department. They (sheriff's department employees) protect us. They need to stay in good condition because their lives - just like the police - are in danger every single day," Oranch said.

Pennington said, "Employer fitness programs are becoming more common nationwide and what we (the city) want to accomplish is a tried and true program; therefore extending this opportunity to city employees not only makes financial sense, it also promotes a productive work culture."

To activate a YMCA membership, a city employee must complete an application at the YMCA. A city employee who has activated a no-cost membership under the agreement may add the employee's family under a reduced-cost membership. The family may sign up with a \$25 one-time joiner fee at a reduced membership rate of \$27.50 per month per family or \$20 per month for single-parent family.

The agreement requires the city to allow the YMCA to conduct one fund-raising drive to benefit its "We Build People" scholarship. The scholarship provides financial assistance to people who need help to come to the YMCA. "We don't want money to be the obstacle," Oranch said.

The 35,000-square-foot YMCA of Palestine facility has an outdoor swimming pool, a wellness center, an exercise room, a gymnasium with locker rooms, a child care center, two racquet ball courts, a multi-purpose room, an aerobic room, an area for physical therapy and a climbing wall. It has a staff of 78 people - 14 full-time employees and the rest part-time.

Established downtown in 1892, relocated in 1956 to Kickapoo Street and moved to North Loop 256 in December 1998, the Palestine YMCA serves approximately 4,800 members from 6-weeks-old to 96-years-old and approximately 5,000 other users. They come not only to exercise but to participate in numerous YMCA events, activities and services.

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