

News + Trends**Fitness centers expand hospital mission and help improve the bottom line**

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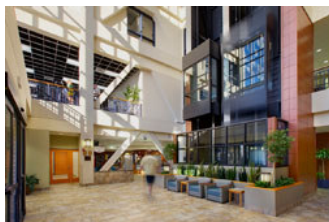
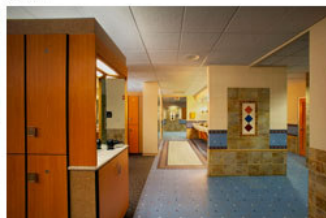
A jogging track overlooks an indoor pool at Fitness Plus, the wellness center at Saint Francis Medical Center in Cape Girardeau, Mo.

It makes sense that hospitals seeking to improve community health would begin opening health and fitness centers. That these centers can also bring in revenue from members, build ties to physicians and other providers, and increase hospital business may make them a financial imperative, too.

"They're consistent with the larger view of their role in the community as not only taking care of sick people, but helping people not get sick in the first place," says Hervey Lavoie, president of Denver-based Ohlson Lavoie Collaborative, an architectural design firm that has been planning hospital-affiliated wellness centers since the mid-1980s.

They're also popular. "Based on information obtained through industry surveys and other sources, the number of [medically integrated health and fitness centers] has grown from 79 in 1985 to 950 in 2008," says the Web site of the Medical Fitness Association (MFA) at www.medicalfitness.org. MFA is an American Hospital Association affiliate.

Despite their medical mission, however, the wellness centers often are designed to look anything but medical, says Donna Jarmusz, a senior vice president at Alter+Care Inc., a Skokie, Ill., firm that provides business planning and operations consulting. Well-appointed locker rooms, running tracks, lap pools, fitness areas—all offer the high-level services consumers expect from commercial clubs.

**Lobby****Café****Gym with track****Men's locker room**

Because of the resources they can draw on, some hospital-based wellness centers are taking a medically integrated approach, offering clinical services such as health assessments, exercise prescriptions, disease management programs, wellness screenings and rehabilitative services, Jarmusz says. In addition to trained fitness advisers, these centers are staffed with certified professionals such as physical and occupational therapists, rehab physiologists and sometimes RNs. "These centers look like a very upscale health club. But the programming is what makes them different," Jarmusz adds.

Saint Francis Medical Center, Cape Girardeau, Mo., has been in the wellness center business since 1996, when it purchased the assets of a commercial fitness club. With the lease on the club expiring in a few years, the hospital began planning a new center that would be attached to the hospital and incorporate the medical integration model, says Marilyn Curtis, vice president of professional services.

The result was a new four-story building tailored to offer both traditional fitness club services and amenities, and disease management and lifestyle programs, including rehabilitation medicine and a host of wellness programs.

Fitness staff and rehab staff share equipment, space and administrative functions at the MFA-certified facility. That sharing has created a synergy and has been a boon to both groups, Curtis says.

Moreover, because of the connection to the hospital, physicians clamored to be involved in the new project. As a result, the bottom two floors of the building are devoted to the fitness center and wellness programs, and the top two are reserved for physician offices.

That's a trend both Lavoie and Jarmusz see in other projects around the country. In the newest development, hospital-based wellness centers incorporating the medically integrated model are sprouting up in health care "villages," where they share a campus with physician offices, specialty clinics, retail health services and imaging centers.

Ultimately, that's good for a community's wellness and a hospital's bottom line.

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