

LEGAL NEWS

Promoting wellness, one step at a time

Rosenberg Martin competition is building relationships, changing lifestyles

By LAUREN KIRKWOOD

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Whether he's meeting a client for dinner, attending a Ravens game or commuting to his downtown Baltimore office, attorney Gerard P. Martin rarely gets behind the wheel of a car or boards a bus, preferring instead to walk to his destinations.

For Martin, who had bilateral knee replacement surgery less than two years ago, logging thousands of steps per week as part of Rosenberg Martin Greenberg LLP's 12-week employee wellness challenge has led to a permanent shift in his lifestyle.

"Most of the things I used to do by getting in a car, I walk," he said. "I think it's terrific; I think everybody should do it. It makes a big difference."

Martin and several dozen other attorneys and support staff at the firm have unleashed their competitive spirits throughout the wellness challenge, which is in week 10 of 12 and has a fairly simple premise: teams of six or seven randomly selected employees use wearable fitness devices or smartphone apps to track the number of steps they take over the course of a week. The top six scores for each team are tabulated at the end of each week, and the team with the most steps each week wins a prize.

At the end of the 12 weeks, the challenge will morph into an NCAA-style bracket, said Jenna Schiappacasse, the firm's marketing director. Each individual competitor will be seeded based on their performances over the course of the program, and the winner will receive a gift certificate to the store or restaurant of their choice.

Local athletic supply store Charm City Run approached the firm about participating in a corporate wellness challenge, Schiappacasse said.

"We decided to go for it — it seemed like a good opportunity to use healthy competition to foster some lifestyle changes," she said. "We all needed to get up and out of our desk chairs and move around more often, and it turned out that the challenge was exactly what we needed to shake things up."



Employees at Rosenberg Martin Greenberg LLP in Baltimore show off their wearable fitness devices that are being used to track steps for an office-wide wellness challenge. "It's not only getting us out there to exercise and be more conscious about moving around, but there's also an encouraging team aspect," one employee says of the competition.

Bonding and uplifting

While Rosenberg Martin did not undertake the initiative through the firm's health insurance provider, similar programs that aim to improve employee health while also reducing health care costs have grown in popularity in recent years.

Since the firm's program started, an environment of friendly competition has emerged in the office, as participants encourage their team members to find ways to stay active during the day and on the weekends, several attorneys and staff members said.

"It's not only getting us out there to exercise and be more conscious about moving around, but there's also an encouraging team aspect," said Shannon A. Byrne, an associate at the firm. "This was

a great way to get involved with people in other practice groups or even on other floors and get to know one another. It's been a good bonding experience."

Although Rosenberg Martin has held a weight-loss competition as a past corporate wellness initiative, employees said this year's challenge has a more uplifting tone.

"This is definitely a whole different animal," said Angela Gettier, a paralegal at the firm. "I think it's inherently more positive — it's for any level of ability. You really don't have, when you turn your numbers in, that feeling of, 'Oh, no, I gained a pound.' It's more, 'Oh, I need to get more steps next week.' It's definitely a positive tone, even if you don't win that week."

Giovanni Alberotanza, an associate at-

torney, said he's been averaging around 86,000 steps a week and, like Martin, has gotten into the habit of walking to work each day.

"It's really helped me, particularly in the winter months, to get off the couch and stay active," he said. "The weather makes you want to just stay at home in a warm place, but it's encouraged me to get back out there and brave the cold."

So far, the largest number of steps taken by a single team in one week has topped 640,000, Schiappacasse said. Several participants said they plan to continue keeping track of their steps as a means of staying in shape even after the official count is completed.

"I had about 10 pounds I wanted to lose, and now it's mostly gone," Martin said. "I'm impressed with this program."

Chipotle faces criminal investigation as sales plunge in December

Experts say federal probe following norovirus outbreak unusual

By CANDICE CHOI

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Chipotle reported a sales plunge of 30 percent for December after a series of food scares at its restaurants and disclosed that a federal criminal investigation tied to the sickening of customers has begun.

The company said in a regulatory filing that it was asked to produce a broad range of documents tied to a norovirus outbreak this summer at its restaurant in Simi Valley, California, but declined to provide further details.

It said the investigation does not in-

volve its restaurants that sickened people in nine states, or a separate norovirus outbreak in Boston.

The investigation is being conducted by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Central District of California in conjunction with the Food and Drug Administration's Office of Criminal Investigations, according to a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission Wednesday.

A representative for the U.S. Attorney's office declined to comment. Representatives for the FDA did not respond to a request for comment.

The emergence of a criminal investigation after a norovirus outbreak is unusual, said Bill Marler, a food safety lawyer representing Chipotle customers who were sickened in Simi Valley.

Outbreaks at restaurants are typically caused by an infected employee.

Marler couldn't think of a reason for a

criminal investigation, which would be a violation of the disclosure. The disclosure of the investigation comes as Chipotle Mexican Grill Inc. reels from E. coli outbreaks in late October and November, which were followed by the sickened customers at a restaurant in Boston in December. Those cases received far more national media attention than the California incident, and the company's sales have since plunged.

Sales fell 14.6 percent in the fourth quarter, marking the first decline for the company since it went public in 2006.

Last month, Chipotle also said it could no longer reasonably predict sales trends given the food scares and retracted its forecast for 2016.

In its regulatory filing Wednesday, the company said it could not determine or predict the amount of any "fines, penalties or further liabilities" it might face in connection with the federal investigation.

A Chipotle spokesman, Chris Arnold,

discuss pending litigation, but that it intends to cooperate fully with the investigation.

Doug Beach, a manager of the food program at Ventura County's Environmental Health Division, said the U.S. Attorney's office requested records from the his office regarding the Chipotle case about a month ago.

"That was a first for us," Beach said in a phone interview.

Beach said Chipotle had been cooperative with the county's investigation, which uncovered issues such as unclear equipment and employees without the necessary food handling permits.

He also noted that Chipotle started getting complaints about illnesses on Tuesday, Aug. 18, and shut down its restaurant the following Friday. Yet the company did not alert the county of the matter until Saturday — after it had already reopened the restaurant, Beach said.