

Some Employers Helping Workers Ease Cost Of Commuting

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From his perch in the boss's seat, David Lewis has had a pretty crummy view of things.

Through the window of his Stamford consulting firm, he has watched gas prices at the station across the street soar past \$4 a gallon. Through his door, he has watched his employees fretting over the extra \$40 and more a week they're spending on commutes from as far as Upper Westchester.

"That's a lot of money coming out of their disposable income pile every week," said Lewis, CEO of human resources firm OperationsInc. "At some point, it's going to put someone in a position of having to make some choices. 'Can I continue to work in Stamford?' is not one of the choices I want my employees to have to make."

So Lewis made a tough choice of his own and decided last week to pass out American Express credit cards to his on-site staff of five. They can fill up their gas tank on the company's dime, up to \$100 a month — a figure he estimates roughly covers \$1 a gallon and gets them back to the fuel prices of about six months ago.

"Not every business can afford to do that, and if I had a larger group it'd be a much more difficult financial decision for me to make," Lewis said. "But I think employers have to start paying attention to this issue and figure out ways to somehow address it."

Lewis is not alone in taking action.

With the average daily round-trip work commute clocking in at upward of 30 miles, and with gas prices at a national average of about \$4.00 (try \$4.26 in Connecticut), more employers such as Lewis are taking creative or tried-and-true measures to address the financial strain that workers feel as they motor to the office. In some places, employees are turning up the heat.

A nationwide survey released last week found that 57 percent of employers offer some workplace program to ease commuting costs. The most popular: a condensed workweek of four 10-hour days, according to Challenger, Gray & Christmas, an outplacement consultancy in Chicago. The survey of 100 human resources executives across a variety of industries also found that one in five companies organizes employee carpools, with 14 percent increasing their telecommuting options and 18 percent subsidizing the cost of public transportation.

In Connecticut, The Rideshare Co., a nonprofit van-pool network based in Windsor, reports a 40 percent increase in inquiries in the past two months. The Connecticut Business and Industry Association had 50 companies participate in its Web seminar on telecommuting last week.

And at Aetna, where about a quarter of 35,000 employees nationwide already telecommute, the health insurer recently raised its monthly transportation subsidies from \$30 to \$50.

The company also formed a task force to explore ways that it can help lower-wage employees who say they're struggling to make ends meet.

Arming For a Fight

Just how benevolent employers are might depend on who's being asked. When employees do the talking, the story shakes out differently.

In a recent national poll of more than 500 workers, 60 percent said their employers were, in fact, not offering any relief in the face of rising gas prices. Only 18 percent reported that their companies had increased their mileage reimbursement rate.

"I found that sort of surprising," said Joshua Howarth, vice president of the New England district of Robert Half International, the staffing firm that conducted the survey. "But I think it may be that employers view a commute as part of the job. They see it as everyone's in the same boat, we're all playing the same game and it is what it is."

Disgruntled workers who want a better boat and a new game have been ringing up the AAA in West Hartford, hoping to gain some numerical ammunition to take to their tightfisted bosses.

"They're upset with their reimbursement rates ... and they've been calling us with the idea that they'll then go back to their employers and see if that can't get a more generous figure," said James MacPherson, a local AAA spokesman.

The figures they're looking for? The association's early 2008 estimate for a vehicle's per-mile cost of driving — including not just gasoline, but also maintenance, insurance and the cost of ownership — was 42.1 cents for the average small sedan at 15,000 miles a year. Large sedans consume 65.1 cents. MacPherson suggests tacking on about five cents to those figures to reflect the most recent spikes in fuel costs.

Meanwhile, the Internal Revenue Service late last year set its annual standard rate for 2008 at 50.5 cents a mile. Only once did the IRS issue a mid-year increase — in 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. A spokeswoman said this summer's soaring gas prices won't likely prompt a similar move.

Most firms interviewed for this story said they reimburse their employees at the federal rate. Others are paying less and are facing pressure

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