

# Height-Adjustable Desks for Prison Staff

## *Improving staff wellness*

**Agency:** Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) State Correctional Institution (SCI) Benner Township

**Project Duration:**  
01/16/19–03/16/19

**Pracademic\*:** Major Curtis Grice

### **Context**

Sitting for extended periods of time has been associated with negative consequences to both physical and psychological health. The opportunity to stand might offer benefits to staff doing desk work.

### **Key Finding**

Although all of the staff who used an HAD and responded to the Time 2 survey reported that they wanted to continue to use the desks, three out of four also reported feeling some leg discomfort while using the desks.

\*BetaGov provides ongoing training to agency personnel to become research-savvy “Pracademics” who can lead trials.

### **Background**

Sitting for long periods of time has been associated with poor health outcomes. Desk-based workers are at particularly high risk of harms from a sedentary lifestyle. Height-adjustable desks (HADs) are one method used to reduce sitting time during work by encouraging a standing position. Recognizing that offering alternatives to sitting might benefit desk-based staff, PADOC wanted to evaluate HADs in a small sample of staff to get their feedback before investing in such desks for all.

### **Design**

Volunteers interested in testing HADs were recruited at SCI-Benner Township. Because only ten desks were purchased, ten volunteers were randomly selected to have an HAD installed at their work stations. Self-report surveys were distributed before (Time 1) and after (Time 2) the desks were installed to gather information about the work environment, health status, and job satisfaction. Time 2 surveys also included questions about the experience using the new desks.

### **Lessons Learned**

Time 1 responses from the ten participants who received desks indicate that all report that their job requires desk work, nine report being productive at least most of the time, and nine report being fatigued at least sometimes. Time sitting at a desk ranged from 2 to 8 hours daily, with a median of 6 hours. Nine participants reported a belief that sitting is associated with poorer health. Only one participant reported having previously tried an HAD, and all participants reported wanting to try an HAD.

Only four of the ten participants completed the Time 2 survey. Although this is a poor follow-up response rate that may not provide representative answers to

the questions posed, we present these as a partial indication of participant perceptions. Responses indicate that the desks were used each day for two to eight hours. Three participants reported that they felt that using the HAD helped to alleviate back or neck pain, provided a boost in energy, and increased focus on tasks. Similarly, three reported feeling leg discomfort or pain at some point while using the desks. Two believe that their posture improved since using the desks. All reported that they enjoyed using the desks and indicated a desire to continue. Additional feedback from open-ended items includes the opinion that the HADs were bulky and heavy and that bigger desks and different chairs would be needed to comfortably use the desk in both sitting and standing options.

### **Next Steps**

The poor response rate limits our ability to make strong conclusions about the benefits of HADs. As in any research that yields a low response rate, we can't determine whether the responses we received are representative of all participants or if the participants who provided Time 2 responses differ from those who did not. Additionally, the intent was to keep the surveys simple in order to encourage completion, but additional questions would have helped to identify for whom the desks are most useful. For example, we did not ask for job titles as that would have limited respondents' ability to remain anonymous, but it would have been interesting to see whether job title/position is related to use of HADs and perceived benefits.

This project is one of several planned to test strategies for improving staff wellness. It may be, however, that a self-report survey is not the appropriate mechanism to gather feedback as there may be little motivation. Future efforts to identify best practices for gathering complete information from staff would be useful.

## **Why BetaGov Spark?**

Sometimes a rigorous trial of an innovative idea just isn't possible, but with a Spark project a practitioner can learn important information about the idea, the agency, and the sample. What's more, a positive signal may inform a future randomized controlled trial and more definitive results. Spark projects meet Pracademics where they are comfortable—giving them the opportunity to learn about research and apply that learning to internal research projects.