# BenefitsPulse

Discover health and benefi[illegible]ouston employees and retirees

Issue 2023


**06**
Yoga: A healing journey for yourself

**08**
Recipe: Baked apples

**09**
Just so you know

**10**
The learning curve of coping

**12**
Getting ready for the big step

**08**
Paid parental leave policy's perfect timing

**14**
Retiree health notes

03

# Walking the talk with breast cancer

HEALTH CHECK:

# Physical and mental health work together

*Take care of your physical and mental well-being for better health*

Although the mind and body may be viewed as being separate, mental and physical health are closely related. Good mental health can positively affect your physical health; poor mental health can negatively affect your physical health; and poor physical health can disorder your mental well-being.

**Here are eight suggestions to help you physically and mentally:**

- Get regular exercise. Exercise is important for keeping physically fit but can also improve your mood. You can start gradually by walking 30 minutes each day in your neighborhood.
- Eat a proper diet. A diet high in fresh fruits and vegetables and low in processed sugars or fats can make you feel better physically and mentally – and help manage your cholesterol level.
- Avoid nicotine and recreational drugs. Drink alcoholic beverages in moderation.
- Get enough sleep. Otherwise, healthy adults usually need seven hours a night.
- Consider participating in regular yoga classes.
- Stay in touch with family and friends.
- Find a significant other. According to the National Center for Health Studies, married people tend to live longer than their unmarried counterparts.
- Have regular exams with a primary care physician that includes recommended health screenings and staying current with immunizations.

By Andrew Albrecht, M.D.

Dr. Albrecht is a board-certified family medicine physician caring for patients at Kelsey-Seybold's Downtown Clinic, 1200 McKinney St., Suite 473.

*We want to know what's on your mind and what you want to know more about. Send story ideas for future issues of Benefits Pulse or comments about recent issues to Victor Varela at Victor.Varela2@houstontx.gov or David Smith at davidf.smith@houstontx.gov.*


## Benefits Pulse

**Vol. 35 – 2023**

Benefits Pulse is published by the City of Houston Human Resources Department.

611 Walker, 4-A
Houston, Texas 77002
832-393-6160

hrenewsletter@houstontx.gov
benefitspulse.org


## The Team

***Mayor***
Sylvester Turner

***Human Resources Director***
Jane E. Cheeks

***Publications Manager***
Leslie Denton-Roach

***Managing Editor***
Victor Varela

***Copy Editor***
David Smith

***Reporters***
Peter Mayes
David Smith
Victor Varela

***Designer***
Mackenzie Petter

## Contact Us

***Benefits Division***

***EMAIL:***
benefits@houstontx.gov

***PHONE:***
832-393-6000

***TOLL FREE:***
1-888-205-9266

***WEB ADDRESS:***
cityofhoustonbenefits.org

*Cover Photo credit:*

# Walking the talk with breast cancer

*Jackie Aguilera says she had to 'put on her big girl pants' to face breast cancer and make the best out of it*

**By Victor Varela**

A true advocate for the community, Jackie Aguilera has dedicated her life to service and helping others overcome obstacles and live life to the fullest. She already strived to practice in her own life what she preached to others. But then an oncologist delivered the news: "You have cancer." Now she must walk the talk and apply her own lessons to overcome the biggest obstacle.

Aguilera is a project manager at the Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy. She has been a City of Houston employee for three and a half years and has worked in adult literacy for almost 40 years now. Her experience goes back to another era, one when access to information hadn't proliferated as it has today. And in some cases, there wasn't even information at all — like during the AIDS crisis where she helped people that no one wanted to help or even touch.

Uncertainty never stopped her from supporting others, a combination of her personality, advocacy, career, and visionary way of thinking led her to collaborate and develop campaigns that use technology to bring literacy to adults.

She defines her job as bringing knowledge to the community in every aspect of life — because change never stops, and it's not just about learning to read and write, it's literacy in a financial matter, technology, health, and day-to-day life.

## You have to walk the talk

"Even if it's uncomfortable or unpleasant, if something can save your life, just put on your big girl pants, and go do it." Aguilera says when it comes to health checkups.

As a provider, a helper and an educator, Aguilera's career has been focused on connecting people with resources and opportunities that enable them to reach their full potential. She often encourages people saying: "You can do this," or "Keep going." But what happens when the coin flips and you must walk the talk — can you do this? Can you keep going?

Following her own advice and walking the talk, Aguilera had a mammogram appointment as part of a regular health checkup. During the screening, the technician told her they needed a few more pictures but it was nothing to be alarmed by, that it was just to make sure they had enough information for the radiologist. A few weeks later she went back for an ultrasound and was told that a lumpectomy would be the next step.

A lumpectomy is a surgery to remove cancer or other abnormal tissue from the breast. But it may also be used to remove certain noncancerous or precancerous breast abnormalities. At this point and after being informed about all the possibilities by her health providers, Aguilera took a deep breath, stayed calm, and told herself, "It could be nothing" and "You can't run with the unknown." Despite the uncertainty, she decided to believe and follow the process.

Before the surgical procedure, Aguilera was open and transparent about the situation with her partner, family, friends, and her director at work, allowing her to feel connected to her support network from the beginning.

At the age of 57 in March, Aguilera was diagnosed with Stage 1 breast cancer. Even though it was caught

**Continued on next page**

**Breast cancer**

Continued from Page 3

early, by the time she was scheduled for surgery in June her aggressive cancer had advanced to Stage 2 and was affecting her lymph nodes.

### Everyone's experience with cancer is different

We have this overwhelming concept of breast cancer; we have all the details, research and the definition, but every person's experience is unique," Aguilera said. As an adult education professional, Aguilera is very aware of diseases — including breast cancer risk, factors and importance, especially being a woman close to middle age. Personally, she has supported close friends going through this disease but had no family history that indicated a higher risk for her.

According to the American Cancer Society, only 15% of American women who get breast cancer have an immediate family member diagnosed with it. Most breast cancer cases have no family history, and the reason may be related to environmental and lifestyle factors.

That Cancer Society study also suggested that 1 out of 8 women will develop breast cancer sometime in their life, meaning that 30% of all new female cancers each year are breast cancer. That makes it the second most common cancer in women in the U.S. (It is the most common cancer worldwide.)

Aguilera decided to focus on what she could handle, what was in her hands, and what she could do more than on the "what ifs" or the "unknowns," as she calls them.

Knowing your rights and understanding your health benefits is the first advice she has for COH employees. Trusting her support network, Aguilera sought advice from one of her friends who is a breast cancer survivor and decided to have her surgery and further treatments at the Baylor St. Luke's Medical Center. Aguilera said: "I am one of the lucky ones because I work in a system that provides good healthcare options, and I am able to take advantage of them because I have the support of where I work." And this is something she can add to her support network. "I am grateful for working with the City of Houston and having an employer that has that type of sensitivity to provide this kind of support," she added.

Feeling comfort from the health assistance she was receiving, Aguilera went into surgery with peace of mind. Even though there was more reconstruction than expected because the surgery removed more than originally planned, she still felt secure with the decision she made.

Waking up after surgery and seeing herself in the mirror as she had never seen herself before was probably one of the hardest parts of this process, Aguilera said. But as soon as her partner told her, "They're still perfect," Aguilera knew she had enough reasons to keep going.

## Breast Cancer Risk Factors

When it comes to breast cancer, there are some risk factors that you can't control, such as your age and genetics. But there are other risk factors that are in your power to control. Although breast cancer cannot be completely prevented, adopting these healthy habits can help reduce your risk for breast cancer.

**Maintain a healthy weight:** Obesity is a risk factor for developing cancer in both men and women. Maintaining a healthy weight can help reduce your risk for obesity and breast cancer.

**Eat fruits and vegetables:** Eating 3.5 to 5 cups of fruits and vegetables daily has been shown to reduce the risk of breast cancer.

**Limit alcohol consumption:** Frequent consumption of alcohol can increase your risk for breast cancer. The more alcohol you consume, the greater your risk.

**Stay physically active:** Studies have shown that women who are physically active have a lower risk of breast cancer than inactive women. Try to move your body at least 20 minutes every day.

**Do not smoke:** Smoking and even breathing second-hand smoke is a risk factor for developing many types of cancer, including breast cancer.

**Schedule your screenings:** Staying proactive about your health through receiving regular health screenings, such as mammograms, well-woman exams, and other screenings as recommended by your doctor, can help identify health problems in their early stages when they are easier to treat.

## We can do nothing but our best

Coping mechanisms are an essential part of who we are and become a part of our personality. For Aguilera, dealing with cancer — just like anything else in her life — in a humorous way has been vital.

Aguilera is the kind of person who will throw a joke here and there to make people feel comfortable and break the tension. She won't let others feel bad for her, but she will let you know when she needs your support.

Staying positive while communicating with humor is an essential part of her healing process. Even if it may seem she is not taking things seriously, this is how she deals with her cancer in the presence of others. But she also has her moments alone when she deals with it in a more serious way.

"You can't worry yourself because worry will destroy you," she said, explaining that it is OK to have days when you can't deal with it and have a meltdown. Aguilera said she recommends embracing your situation and doing whatever you have to so it doesn't destroy you. And if it knocks you down, then get back up.

Sometimes this means putting your best face up front and going through the day. She believes that whatever a person is growing through can be used for something else or to learn from it.

"I'm not saying cancer has a purpose but it's going to be what you make of it," she said. "And that's what keeps me going."

## Where your mind goes your body follows

In a challenging life situation with a lot of uncertainty, Aguilera remains positive and believes that paying attention to what really matters is the key, instead of thinking of what could have been done differently.

"Sometimes you get an extra thing to deal with. You didn't ask for it, you didn't plan for it, but it comes down to what are you going to do about it and how are you going to make it through," she said.

Aguilera's cancer was hard to detect. There were no signs of it in physical exams and she never felt sick or had pain. Apart from the age factor, there were no reasons to consider she was at increased risk.

Some cancers are hormone receptor-positive and some are negative. The receptors are proteins that normal breast cells and some cancers use to attach to hormones such as estrogen and progesterone in order to grow. Jackie's breast cancer is estrogen-based — what she describes in a playful way as "her own hormones turning against her." An increased risk factor for hormone receptor-positive cancers is not having kids. If she had known that before, she would have taken her mammograms more seriously.

"I was supposed to have my appointment in August 2022, but I skipped it because I was too busy and rescheduled it for spring of this year." She reflected on her decision and added: "I skipped something that later became the determinant of my living."

## Make time for what really matters

Learning from her experience and moving forward, her focus now is on what really matters: the worth of the small, precious things in life, and time. She regrets missing out on things like her grandson's kindergarten graduation because she was busy with work and, of course, rescheduling her mammogram for the same reason. But instead of staying stuck in what can't be changed, she chooses to value everything, even the smaller things such as a dragonfly

**Continued on Page 18**

Krystal Norris-Garth is a health educator, wellness advocate, and certified yoga instructor for the City of Houston.

*Photo by Victor Varela*

**By Victor Varela**

In the beginning, yoga was nothing but a job requirement for Krystal Norris-Garth, something she just had to do to stay in compliance. Working as a recreational therapist at a mental health facility, she was asked to become a certified yoga instructor, something she wasn't opposed to but never saw as more than that.

Now, Norris-Garth is a public health educator with the City of Houston Health and Wellness Team, and her job is to bring awareness to employee needs, making sure we have access to the tools and resources we need by creating health and wellness programs and classes — one of which is yoga.

Although classical yoga has other elements, it has become a popular way to promote physical and mental well-being, especially in the United States where its practice emphasizes physical postures (asanas), breathing techniques (pranayama), and meditation (dyana).

Norris-Garth had an early casual introduction to yoga. Then in 2018 the hospital where she worked offered yoga as a wellness benefit to patients. Her first thought was: "I am not flexible," she said. Although she did not think she was the right person for the job, she decided to go with it.

Once she started practicing, she noticed a difference. Far from being just a benefit for her employer and patients, it was one for herself. After going through a learning curve, she realized the effect of yoga on herself and the potential for it to be a wellness resource for the community.

"It's more than just physical exercise, it can help you relax, fight depression, and anxiety," she said.

With the popularity yoga has gained in the last few years, it was easy for Norris-Garth to practice more often. Little by little she started going to yoga classes perfecting what she had learned until she felt comfortable enough to offer free classes at parks and different establishments around the Houston area.

At this point, she became an advocate and decided to start her own practice to share the knowledge with her family, friends and community.

### It's easier with yoga

"You don't have to think about balance, it comes naturally." Krystal Norris-Garth

When it comes to work-life balance, Norris-Garth can easily tell how she applies what she does in yoga to other aspects of her life. In a session, the focus is on your breathing and poses. At the same time, you relax and give your body and mind space to be quiet and eventually reset to keep going.

In moments of distress, Norris-Garth finds herself applying yoga breathing exercises to stay calm. It now comes naturally to her everyday life. Yoga teaches being consistent and being present. You also learn to put yourself first and learn your limits, strength and flexibility. Without knowing it you build resilience. Your focus is on the moment, what you can do, what's in your hands to handle, and when to let go.

Norris-Garth also shares another lesson with her yoga students: the perception of constant change in yoga — just like in life. Change is always happening, and even though we are aware of this, we are normally very skeptical and unexpecting about it.

The practice of this mindfulness discipline has been studied in different fields, including psychology and medicine. Indeed, the American Osteopathic Association – in an interview with Natalie Nevins, DO, a board-certified osteopathic family physician, and certified Kundalini Yoga instructor — recommends it not only for patients with current illnesses but also as a prevention method.

"The relaxation techniques incorporated in yoga can lessen chronic pain, such as lower back pain, arthritis, headaches and carpal tunnel syndrome," Nevins explained. "Yoga can also lower blood pressure and reduce insomnia."

Other benefits associated with yoga include flexibility, muscle strength and tone, improved respiration, energy and vitality, maintaining a balanced metabolism, weight reduction, cardio and circulatory health, improved athletic performance, and protection from injury, among others.

People can easily integrate yoga into their lifestyle. Yoga can enhance balance in other aspects, plus practitioners can decide how and when to do it, starting with a 10-minute morning session to be energized for the day; a full 30- to 60-minute session to decompress, let go and reboot; or a short and simple nighttime mindfulness stretch to get ready to sleep.

### Don't hesitate, just go for it!

Working for the City of Houston as a public health educator with the Health and Wellness Division, Norris-Garth's supervisor soon realized the potential she had being a certified instructor and decided to include yoga as part of the Wellness resources the City of Houston offers to all employees.

"It's a healing journey for yourself, that brings structure without even noticing it and it connects to your day-to-day life," Norris-Garth said.

As a health advocate, Norris-Garth wants to share her knowledge with the community. She said she also wants to build more communities by making sure that no one is left out and understands that yoga is literally for "everybody."

For those who are hesitating to start or are new to yoga, Norris-Garth's advice is:

- Have an open mind, anybody can do yoga.
- It's alone time that you spend with yourself, and it allows you to reset.
- We get so busy we forget that our bodies and minds need time to do nothing.
- You don't have to be flexible; just be open to continue.
- Keep in mind poses can be modified and mastered with time and practice.
- Be open to change.

Lastly, and probably most importantly, Norris-Garth said, "Give yourself grace. Yoga is a personal practice. Never judge or base someone else's practices on what you are doing."

Learn more and join Krystal for free yoga sessions at cohemployees.org/yoga.

Krystal Norris-Garth leads a yoga session for COH employees at Hermann Square.

*Photo by David Smith*

# BAKED APPLES AND PEARS WITH ALMONDS

## LEVEL: EASY
## TOTAL TIME: 30 minutes

This delicious dessert uses a small amount honey and the natural flavors of seasonal apples and pears to satisfy any sweet craving without the guilt.

### INGREDIENTS

- Four small Granny Smith or Golden Delicious apples and/or pears (can also substitute any variety of apple as available or on sale)
- 1/4 cup unsalted almonds (chopped)
- 2 tablespoons dried, unsweetened cranberries or raisins
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 teaspoons honey

### HOW TO MAKE IT

1. Preheat the oven to 400°F. Fill a small baking dish with 1/4 inch of water. Set aside.
2. Cut ½ inch off the top of the apples. Reserve the tops.
3. Using a spoon or paring knife, core out the apples, leaving the bottoms intact.
4. In a small bowl, combine the almonds, cranberries, and cinnamon, stirring gently.
5. Drizzle the honey over the almond mixture, stirring until the almonds and cranberries are coated.
6. Spoon the almond mixture into the apple cavities. Replace the tops. Place the apples in the baking dish. Bake, covered loosely with aluminum foil, for 30 minutes. Remove the foil. Bake for 15 minutes, or until the apples are tender and lightly golden.

# NUTRITION FACTS

**One serving has: 153 calories / 4.5 grams of total fat / 0.5 grams of saturated fat / 0 grams of trans fat / 0 milligrams of cholesterol / 2 milligrams of sodium / 29 grams of total carbohydrates / 5 gram of dietary fiber / 21 gram of total sugars / 2 grams of protein / 1 gram of polyunsaturated fat**

**Source: American Heart Association**

# just so you know

## Get your annual mammogram at no cost

### Annual mammogram screenings are recommended for women starting at 40. Find out how to get yours.

If you're a woman aged 40 or older it's time to start getting an annual mammogram. These types of screenings can detect tumors too small for you or your doctor to feel, according to Cigna. While mammograms can't prevent you from getting breast cancer, early detection of breast cancer can improve prognosis.

**Who can get a mammogram?**

If you're a city employee enrolled in a city health plan you can get one mammogram per calendar year.

**What is my copay for this health screening?**

Annual mammograms are considered preventive health screenings for women aged 40 and older and are provided at no cost to city employees enrolled in a city health plan.

**What about follow-up visits?**

If your doctor requires a follow-up visit for additional testing and imaging, you will be responsible for copays and additional costs for services not covered under preventative health screenings.

**Can I see an out-of-network doctor?**

You must see an in-network doctor to have preventative health screenings fully covered, according to Cigna.

**Who can I contact about benefits coverage?**

Contact Cigna member services at 800-997-1406.

**You can contact the Benefits Division at:**

832-393-6000
benefits@houstontx.gov
retireebenefits@houstontx.gov

*@COHEmployeeNews*
*@COHEmployeeNews*

## Coping with a cancer diagnosis

It can be challenging dealing with a cancer diagnosis. See what resources city employees can access to help them navigate the process.

A cancer diagnosis can make you feel anxious, nervous, and uncertain about the future. During this time, you will need support. Here are few resources that can help you or a family member cope with a cancer diagnosis:

### EAP

Your City of Houston Employee Assistance Program offers someone you can to talk and resources to consult whenever and wherever you need them. The EAP offers six free sessions to employees and their household family members. Call 832-393-6510 or 855-378-7485 to speak with someone (TTY:711).

### LIVESTRONG at the YMCA

Your local YMCA has partnered with the LIVESTRONG Foundation to offer a small-group cancer survivorship program for those who are living with, through or beyond cancer.

### Cigna

Cigna offers a variety of resources in their Wellness Library about cancer and related topics. From dealing with fatigue to various articles on different types of cancers, the library is filled with helpful information.

### American Cancer Society in Texas

Texans living with cancer can get support managing their treatments and recovery through the American Cancer Society in Texas. You can find a list of resource referrals to help with free transportation, lodging and more.

Greg Eyerly, director of Wastewater Operations with Houston Public Works and 12-time powerlifting champion.

*Photo by Victor Varela*

**By Victor Varela**

Multidisciplinary athlete Greg Eyerly is an example of discipline and determination for whom rules have changed due to an unexpected turn of life that made him shift and start again.

Adaptive mechanisms like Eyerly embraced can help people cope with issues they may be struggling with, as well as improve health and give a feeling of accomplishment. It's hard for us to let them go, and why would we? If there's nothing wrong with it — nothing, that is, until life takes an unexpected turn and suddenly you lose what's been helping you cope, and it becomes another loss you must grieve.

Eyerly is Houston Public Works' director of Wastewater Operations. He oversees 39 wastewater plants all over the city, making sure their processes protect the environment and human health, as well as improve the wastewater system for generations to come.

But apart from his service for the City of Houston, Eyerly has found success in every sport he tries: running, cycling, ultrarunning, and most recently powerlifting, where he has been champion 12 times in the state, national and world competitions since he started at age 54.

Eyerly enjoys exercising — a lot. "The more you can weave fitness into your life the better," he said. Three to four times a week he takes his lunch break to lift some weights, and later in the evening he goes to the gym with his wife. He appreciates the benefits it brings to his life by helping him stay active and resetting his mind.

When people ask Eyerly where he finds time to work out, he says: "If you are looking to find the time, you will never find it, you have to make the time, and you have to put a block on your calendar."

## Learning to cope

Another benefit Eyerly found in competitive sports is coping. He started powerlifting as an adaptive coping mechanism when he was going through a divorce from his previous wife.

"It's a grieving process in whichever end you are," he said. And in that rough time of his life, he said to himself, "I don't have to live the same way for the rest of my life."

The National Institutes of Health defines coping mechanisms as the thoughts and behaviors we consciously and voluntarily do to manage internal and external stressful situations. These are different from defense mechanisms — a subconscious or unconscious adaptive response — even though both intend to reduce or tolerate stress. Coping mechanisms can prevent stress or can be a reaction after the stressor.

Through our life experiences, and mostly in our childhood, we develop mechanisms that feel like natural responses to different situations. It's also possible to develop and improve coping skills later in life that empower us to change stressful

situations or adjust our emotional responses. Those can include deep breathing, meditating, journaling and exercising, to mention a few. But sometimes they can also present as maladaptive coping mechanisms such as alcohol and drug abuse, angry outbursts, self-harm, isolation and more. Those temporary distracters can lead to avoidance and eventually physical and emotional harm. Going through the process of turning something negative into a positive, Eyerly coached himself and won multiple state powerlifting titles in Oregon. Encouraged to take it further, he started training with a professional coach and a couple of months later won the National Bench Press Championship and then gold at the World Powerlifting Championships. This was just the beginning of a new passion.

### The rules have changed

With the help of his professional coaches, Eyerly was training for a powerlifting competition this summer. Close to age 60 and a few weeks away from the competition, he suffered a heart attack at home with his wife. Even for the doctors it was a surprise, since there were no indicators and Eyerly follows a healthy lifestyle. He had to have surgery due to coronary artery block causing low blood flow from the heart to the rest of the body.

"The rules have changed completely for me now, whether I power lift again or not", Eyerly said as he remembered he has been in a similar situation. "This is another opportunity for me to rethink how I do stuff."

Grief is the natural response to loss, a hard-to-navigate rollercoaster of emotions that — following the stages of grief — can go from shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance and hope. It's a moment of vulnerability when coping skills help to deal with emotions as best as we can.

Having experienced grief before — even if it was in a different instance — can help create resilience and view the situation from a different perspective, one with more positive outcomes.

Eyerly started participating in competitive sports at the age of 12, and through the years he has shown an impressive capability to adapt to the physical requirements of each sport, making him an example of discipline and determination. He has run an ultramarathon — 100 miles in 23 hours — and was featured in multiple cycling magazines. One year he ran 146 races. He also broke the Oregon state record and became a World Champion in powerlifting.

Greg Eyerly at a powerlifting competition.

*Photo courtesy of Greg Eyerly*

### The curve

Focusing on his health and using his grieving and coping experience to move forward, Eyerly knows he doesn't need to run 100 miles again or win another powerlifting championship to validate himself. "It's taking care of who you are; you don't need to do more than that," he says.

Learning from the curve after an unexpected turn in life, he looks back at all his achievements with pride and is ready to let go and shift all that energy toward the people he loves.

"Being present, being there for your wife, being there for your co-workers, that's enough and that's what you need to focus on," he said.

Now with a healthy diet, steady exercise, and a little bit of strength training, Eyerly is taking this experience as a mind shift. He looks at the situation as an opportunity to refocus his energy on what matters the most and in general to be present.

## When you need help

We grieve every loss — even the smaller ones — but we don't always give ourselves the space, recognition or validation to fully cope with the loss. If you or a co-worker is going through a grieving process, contact EAP for support.

Through the City of Houston EAP's external provider, ComPsych/GuidanceResources, employees and their immediate family members can receive eight free grief support/counseling sessions.

**Internal EAP: 832-393-6510**

**External EAP: 855-378-7485**

**guidanceresources.com**

**WEB ID: HOUSTONEAP**

Or, reach out to your Cigna at 800-997-1406, the number on the back of your insurance card.

# Getting ready for the big step

**By Victor Varela**

Retired from the Houston Fire Department at age 62, Robert Mohrman is working on a new painting in his studio.

*Photos courtesy of Robert Mohrman*

Retiring from work is not retiring from life. Starting this chapter doesn't mean committing to a permanent routine.

When people contemplate and plan for retirement, the natural tendency is to focus first on the financial part — staying informed about policies, retirement plans, pensions, and expert advice. After that, people think about it as a permanent vacation or simply may not think about it at all.

Preparing emotionally and psychologically is just as important as being financially ready. Even though retirement may look like "living the good life," some retirees experience depression and anxiety while acclimating to this new lifestyle. Each experience may be tied to own perspectives and ways of seeing life among other factors. But having a plan or at least a visualization of the bigger picture can be helpful when preparing for the big step.

Factors such as financial status, health status and proximity to loved ones are important to keep track of since they change with time and could have a significant impact on retirement. Having a realistic idea of how the future may look can help people adapt better by knowing what to expect when they retire and also start making more informed and healthier decisions.

Over time some people realize that retiring is more than just not working anymore, and this concept may not seem as exciting as before or you may just want something different.

For example, if work life involves a lot of mental stimulation, the switch to a much slower pace may seem boring, even to those who were looking forward to retirement. Other unexpected life-changing events like a medical diagnosis or the loss of a loved one — such as a partner — may cause us to reevaluate and adapt to new conditions.

## What to Expect

Riley Moynes is a retired educator and author of the book "The Four Phases of Retirement: What to Expect When You're Retiring." For him it all starts during the vacation phase — also known as the honeymoon phase — where people who have just retired can basically do whatever they want, from resting to waking up late, or traveling. In general, people perceive it to be the ideal concept of feeling freedom from a work routine and life as we know it. This stage will vary depending on the person, but it typically lasts a year or so. When the second and hardest phase appears — a need for structure and getting back into a routine that arises from the

feeling of boredom — there will also be a sense of disconnection and a loss of direction.

According to Moynes, there is no way to avoid this phase. He advises to be prepared to feel fear, anxiety, and even some level of depression. The length of this phase is undefined, in some cases, after months or years the overwhelming mix of emotions can lead to taking action and moving to the next phase, but for others, this may turn into a permanent state.

Although getting to phase three may already feel like an accomplishment in itself, it doesn't mean it's much easier. Seeking meaning and purpose and reconnecting with the world will not only take time but also lots of trial and error that could end in disappointment. This is why phase two is so important and unavoidable because that's when the need to reconnect with yourself, ask where to go, and get in motion toward change will first appear and serve as motivation later.

Finally, after all the ups and downs and the readjustments to the new normal, phase four comes in as a reward. The lost sense of purpose reappears and, in most cases according to Moynes' experience, bringing service to others becomes one of the most meaningful activities rewarding us with the feeling of accomplishment. "Those who break through phase four are the happiest people." Maynes said.

### Retiring from work is not retiring from life

Former COH employee Robert Mohrman retired from the Houston Fire Department at age 62. He enjoys his retirement by painting, fishing and doing woodwork. The best advice he has for future retirees is to be prepared: "Before retiring you need a plan — not a written plan, but a course of action to take such as a hobby, something that will occupy your time and energy." he said.

To those who have a spouse or a partner, Mohrman's advice is to be ready to grow back together and readjust, especially if the other person is also retiring since you will be spending a lot more time together.

And for those currently struggling with retirement — or find themselves in phase two – his recommendation is to keep going.

"Live your life, be productive, embrace a hobby, and if you don't have one try different things just don't become stagnant," Mohrman said.

Mohrman enjoys his retirement by painting, fishing and doing wordwork.

## First steps for COH employees getting ready to retire:

1. Contact your pension system to determine your eligibility status for retirement or deferred retirement.

   **Houston Municipal Employee Pension System**

   713-595-0100

   **Houston Firefighters' Relief And Retirement Fund**

   281-372-5100

   **Houston Police Officers' Pension System**

   713-869-8734

2. Contact your department's HR Client Relations Manager to complete any other information that is needed to begin the retirement process.

3. Decide if you wish to continue with your health benefits or opt out.

4. Ask as many questions as you need and know your options.

Scan the QR or go to **cohemployees.org/RetirementGuide** to see the COH retirement guide presentation.

# Paid parental leave policy's perfect timing

*COH employees are seeing tangible benefits of the Prenatal, Parental and Infant Wellness policy*

**By Pete Mayes**

Houston City Council last April passed the Prenatal, Parental and Infant Wellness ordinance which provided much needed support for first time parents. The ordinance could not have come soon enough for Robert Ahumada, an IT specialist for the City of Houston who was about to become a first-time dad.

"The timing of the policy couldn't have been better," he said. "Prior to the policy, we were trying to figure out the best way to manage the baby care — which local family members could help, who could fly in, the timing of it all, etc."

Ahumada and his wife were expecting their first child, who was born July 11, 2022. While policies like this one are usually meant to give support to mothers, first-time fathers like Ahumada can benefit from this support as well. The time provided by the policy brought him and his family some relief and flexibility on how to spread out the outside help and maximize the support and assistance for his wife and baby.

According to Policy A.P. 3-16, Article 6, Section 7a, paid prenatal, parental and infant wellness leaves are available to eligible employees to cover their absences away from work due to prenatal wellness healthcare appointments and/or other absences related to the pregnancy.

The policy will apply equally to any parent regardless of gender and applies to couples, whether male, female, or LGBTQ+.

Mayor Sylvester Turner said all city employees benefit from the passage of this policy.

"By offering paid, prenatal, parental, and infant wellness leaves, the City of Houston will be able to attract and retain top talent while supporting families and children. As a father, I understand the importance of bonding with a newborn, and I also listened to the stories of employees who have struggled to balance work with the birth or adoption of a child," he said.

Ahumada said having the time to spend bonding with his baby and providing support to his wife was priceless. He said it allowed him to be there for all the baby's medical visits, speak to the doctor, understand his baby's development and progress, and, of course, be therefore the dreaded shots.

"That part was not fun, but I was glad I was able to be there for our baby," he said.

Ahumada said his wife was

***"Without the policy, I would be in a different mindset coming home from work and then having to plug into baby caring mode. The parental leave gave me the opportunity to be present to learn, care and love."***

***-Robert Ahumada***

Robert Ahumada kisses his newborn daughter Aria's hand. The City of Houston's Prenatal, Parental and Infant Wellness policy helped give him the time needed to be with his family as he and his wife adjusted to their lives as parents.

*Photo courtesy of Robert Ahumada*

recovering from having a Cesarean section and postpartum depression. The time he spent caring for both mother and child provided him insight into the teamwork it takes to not only care for the baby but tending to the house, he said.

"I honestly do know how a single parent can manage to care for a newborn on their own," he said. "I have great admiration for them. Without the policy, I would be in a different mindset coming home from work and then having to plug into baby caring mode. The parental leave gave me the opportunity to be present to learn, care and love."

Family time is important to Ahumada.

"In general, it's always important. But especially during the first year of a child's life," he said. "It may be a cliché, but they truly grow up so fast and time really does go by so fast. You want to be there as much as you can for your child."

Ahumada said that, as a first-time father, he learned firsthand the immense value of this policy and appreciates the opportunity it gave him to connect and be involved in the life of his and his wife's newborn.

"Every day is the first and only time your child will experience that day," he said. What a wonderful feeling it is to be able to spend it with them. This policy has granted parents a valuable resource — time."

## Highlights of the Paid Parental Leave Policy

The PPI policy provides eligible city employees with:

- A maximum of 160 hours of paid prenatal leave for prenatal wellness healthcare appointments and other absences related to the pregnancy.
- A maximum of 320 hours of paid parental leave to bond and care for a child after the birth or placement of a child with the employee for adoption or foster care to be used within the first year after childbirth or placement of a child with the employee for adoption or foster care (maximum number of hours will increase to 480 effective Sept. 1, 2023).
- A maximum amount of 40 hours of infant wellness leave following the birth of a child or placement of a child with the employee for adoption or foster care to be used during the infant's first year after birth.

To be eligible for PPI, an employee must meet the following criteria:

- Be a full-time employee (part-time and temporary employees are not eligible); and
- Be employed by the City of Houston as a full-time employee for at least six continuous months prior to the initial use of PPI.

The policy will apply equally to any parent regardless of gender and applies to couples, whether male, female, or LGBTQ+.

# THE WAIT IS OVER!

WIN FOR LIFE
RENEW. REFRESH. REIGNITE.

## CITY EMPLOYEES AND RETIREES: YOUR NEW WELLNESS CENTER IS OPEN

On Oct. 2 and beyond, feel free to stop by and take a peek, join a workout class, or engage with our health coaches. Be on the lookout for special health-focused events and activities!

The all new, "Health Focus Fridays" are opportunities to engage in specific activities and resources for your optimal health.

Get a jumpstart, by registering at the link below or scan the QR code.

We look forward to supporting you in your fitness and wellness journey!

WELLNESS CENTER

**cohemployees.org/WC**

## Facilities

Weight lifting
Cardio area
Strength area
Showers
Lockers

## Hours of Operation

MON-FRI | 6 a.m. - 7 p.m.

## Location

City Hall Basement, 901 Bagby

**HoustonWellnessConnection.org**

# Retiree *Health Notes*

## *The CDC recommends the RSV vaccine for adults aged 60 and over*

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) can cause serious illness in infants, young children, and older adults. RSV season, which is typically in fall and winter, is right around the corner and RSV activity has already started to increase in the Southeastern United States.

RSV can cause serious illness in infants, young children, and older adults. In fact, RSV is the leading reason that babies are hospitalized in the United States.

This year, the CMC is advocating their strongest position ever with new RSV immunizations available to help protect babies, toddlers, and older adults from severe RSV.

If you are 60 or over, you should talk to your healthcare provider about whether RSV vaccination is appropriate for you at this time.

*— Center for Disease Control*

## Writers wanted for retiree perspectives

### Attention retirees:

Benefits Pulse is looking for a few good writers to contribute to our publication. We are seeking guest writers to explore topics related to retiree health and wellness.

If you are interested, email Victor Varela at Victor.Varela2@houstontx.gov or call 832-393-6134.

## *Memory, Forgetfulness, and Aging: What's Normal and What's Not?*

Many older adults worry about their memory and other thinking abilities. For example, they might be concerned about taking longer than before to learn new things, or they may sometimes forget to pay a bill. These changes are usually signs of mild forgetfulness — often a normal part of aging — not serious memory problems.

### What's normal forgetfulness and what's not?

What's the difference between normal, age-related forgetfulness and a serious memory problem? It's normal to forget things once in a while as we age, but serious memory problems make it hard to do everyday things like driving, using the phone, and finding your way home.

Talk with your doctor to determine whether memory and other cognitive problems, such as the ability to clearly think and learn, are normal and what may be causing them.

Signs that it might be time to talk to a doctor include:

- Asking the same questions over and over again
- Getting lost in places a person knows well
- Having trouble following recipes or directions
- Becoming more confused about time, people, and places
- Not taking care of oneself eating poorly, not bathing, or behaving unsafely

*— National Institute on Health*

## *More free COVID tests are available at covidtests.gov*

After September 25, every U.S. household can again place an order to receive four more free COVID-19 rapid tests delivered directly to their home. Go to covidtests.gov to order yours.

Before you throw out "expired" tests, check to see if the expiration dates have been extended at cohemployees.org/covid_tests.

## Benefits Contacts

### Medical and Dental

**City of Houston Benefits Division**
832-393-6000
*cityofhoustonbenefits.org*
*benefits@houstontx.gov*

**Cigna in City Benefits Division**
832-393-6191 • 832-393-6193
832-393-6305

**Cigna 24/7 Customer Service**
800-997-1406
*mycigna.com*

**Cigna Dental**
800-997-1406
*mycigna.com*

**TASC (Total Administrative Services Corporation)**
800-422-4661
*tasconline.com*

**Superior Vision**
800-507-3800
*superiorvision.com*

**EAP**
832-393-6510 • 855-378-7485 TTY:711
*employeeassistanceprogram@houstontx.gov*
*guidanceresources.org*
WEB ID: HOUSTONEAP

### Medicare Advantage

**Aetna**
888-267-2637 (TTY:711)
*aetnamedicare.com*

**KelseyCare Advantage**
713-442-2264
*kelseycareadvantage.com*

### Retirement

**Empower Retirement**
713-426-5588 • 800-701-8255

**Houston Municipal Employee Pension System**
713-595-0100
Toll Free: 800-858-1450
*hmeps.org*

**Houston Firefighters' Relief and Retirement Fund**
281-372-5100
*www.hfrrf.org*

**Houston Police Officers' Pension System**
713-869-8734
*hpops.org*

**Breast cancer**
Continued from Page 5

deciding to perch on her arm. Or the connection with nature she feels when she's surrounded by trees in a forest.

Her cancer diagnosis taught her to stop, take a deep breath, stay calm, and rethink her purpose and intentions.

Having clear that she wants to promote the good in the world and drill down health literacy on a deeper level, especially when it comes to breast cancer. She knows her purpose. As for her intentions, being aware of the support she has received through this hard time and knowing that a support network is built by being there for others without expecting anything in return, she knows where she wants to be. She is ready to make more memories with her partner, their three daughters, two grandkids, and their third grandchild who is on the way.

At this time, according to the American Cancer Society, there are more than 3.8 million breast cancer survivors in the U.S. This includes women still being treated and those who have completed treatment. Taking into consideration that treatments improve over time, women now being diagnosed with breast cancer may have a better outlook.

Still, with a lot of uncertainty, Jackie is ready to make the best of life with breast cancer. The only thing she is not ready to do is to let go.

"I'm not going anywhere! I have too much to see."

## Drawing Conclusions

By Paul Beckman

# Recipe Makeover

## Ingredient swaps for healthier baking

### Swap Greek Yogurt for Cream

Greek yogurt has a similar consistency as buttercream, sour cream, and cream cheese, but is much healthier for you. Not only does it contain a healthy dose of probiotics, but it's also a good source of vitamin B12. To swap out yogurt for sour cream or cream cheese, you can typically use the same amount that the recipe calls for.

### Swap Applesauce for Butter & Oil

Applesauce is similar enough in wetness and consistency to make an excellent substitution for fats like butter and oil. Use about a quarter of a cup of applesauce per egg. In some cases, you may have to slightly adjust other parts of your recipe to account for the missing eggs.

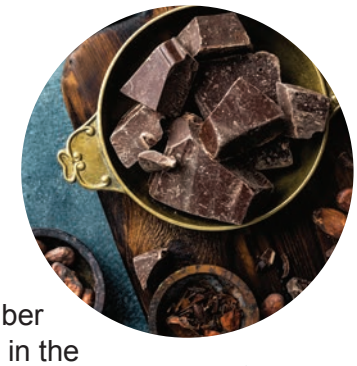
### Swap Fruit Puree for Processed Sugar

Use fruit such as raisins, dried apricots, dates or bananas instead of sugar, which naturally add sweetness. Use dried fruit puree, applesauce, or mashed bananas to replace some of the sugar and fat in cookies and muffins.

### Swap Oat Flour for White Flour

White flour, like white bread and white sugar, are virtually void of usable nutrients, making these foods essentially empty calories. Other types of flour such as oat, buckwheat, and spelt, are high in dietary fiber and other important nutrients. These ingredients can even help to lower bad cholesterol levels.

### Swap Dark Chocolate for Milk Chocolate

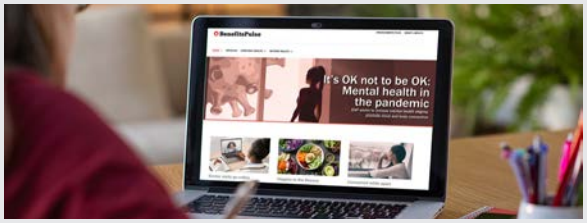


Dark chocolate contains significantly less sugar than do milk and white chocolates, so this can be a really simple way to cut down on sugar and calories in your holiday baking. Remember that the higher the percentage of cocoa in the chocolate, the healthier it is!

# BenefitsPulse

City of Houston
Human Resources Department
611 Walker, 4-A
Houston, TX 77002

Presorted Standard
U.S. Postage
PAID
Houston TX
Permit NO. 5113




**Retirees: Stay in touch and sign up for Benefits news and information**

If you are a City of Houston retiree who would like to stay in touch and receive benefits information emails and Benefits Pulse and City Savvy newsletters in your inbox, sign up for our mailing list.

**Scan or visit bit.ly/COHRetiree**

# Benefitplace

## *Your one-stop-shop for managing your benefits.*

- View your enrollments
- Update or add dependents
- Update or add beneficiaries
- Make changes due to Qualifying Life Events (QLEs) like birth, adoption, death, marriage and more

## *How to access Benefitplace*

- **Retirees:** Go to benefitplace.houstontx.gov. For guides, visit cohemployees.org/benefitplace_guides
- **Employees:** Log on to hroneconnect.houstontx.gov and choose the Benefitplace tile under Organizational Updates