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TOWERING TELECOM

Page 64

Top Stories
of 2016

Page 6

Healthcare

Special section begins page 28

Building Alaska

Special section begins page 60



Corporate Massage Therapy

Booming industry
boosts morale

By Rindi White

It's Tuesday afternoon and your upper back is already on fire with tense muscles.

Scientists mostly agree that sitting at a desk for long periods of time is bad for our bodies, leading to strain on the upper body, shoulders, and arms. But with a mountain of work ahead, what's a desk jockey to do?

Enter Alaska's corporate massage therapists. They come periodically to a workplace and, in the course of a few hours, offer therapeutic and restorative massage to a few dozen employees.

"Not only does it feel good, but it will relax tensing [muscles] and relieve anxiety and stress. It boosts the immune system so employees will be less likely to get sick. And if they have repetitive motion injuries, or we can prevent repetitive motion injuries, they are less likely to file workman's compensation claims," says Rose Brigmon.

Brigmon is a licensed massage therapist and employee of Oriental Healing Arts Center. This spring, Brigmon embarked on a new business, Balance and Restore, providing therapeutic massage on location at several businesses.

"We go on a regular basis to the South-central Foundation, and they have us set up several therapists whenever they do training," Brigmon says. She says her crew also works with a few other corporations, including the US Department of the Interior,



Massage therapists Tai Trujillo, top left and above left, and Workplace Massage owner Yael Hickok, above right, delivering corporate massage therapy to clients at Pillar Financial in Anchorage.

Photos by Elora Libal/Courtesy of Workplace Massage

which rewards its employees with massage for completing their end-of-year goals.

"Our office management was looking for a way to reward our hard working team. We came up with the idea of providing massages in the office which led us to Balance and Restore," writes Stu Hartford, transportation director for the Department of the Interior in a testimonial. "Thanks to Rose, this event brought positive energy into our workplace, improving morale, productivity, and camaraderie."

Yael Hickok, a licensed massage therapist and owner of Workplace Massage, also provides on-location chair massages around Anchorage.

"We can do a lot in ten minutes or fifteen minutes, if we're just focusing on one small area," Hickok says. "It doesn't replace the benefits of a full-body massage, but it keeps people at their workplace."

The therapy sessions are fairly quick, so employees can schedule a session without missing a lot of work. And, with a chair massage, there's no need to change clothes.

Hickok says she doesn't use oils, so clients' skin doesn't get greasy.

Family Friendly

Prior to Brigmon's opening Balance and Restore, Hickok was the primary provider for on-location massage therapy in Anchorage. With eighteen years of experience as a massage therapist, Hickok found that the hours for traditional therapy work—late afternoons and weekends—didn't jibe with the demands of her young family.

"I needed to find something that I could do while the kids were in school, with low overhead," she says. "Nobody else was doing this at the time. There were other people doing chair massages at businesses, but they weren't doing it as their primary business—they were doing it to bring people to their table-massage business."

Hickok got the business going and quickly found that there was a greater demand than she could meet on her own. She started contracting with licensed massage therapists to serve businesses around Anchorage and throughout the state.

"They were happy to let me do the legwork," she says. She uses an online signup system at her website, workplacemassage-ak.com, that works well and sends out reminders to clients prior to a scheduled visit to their workplace.

Hickok says her team works with about a dozen Anchorage-area businesses. She has between five and ten licensed massage therapists on her team at any given time—some just work special events while others work about twenty-five hours a week.

While chair massages are the most common, Hickok says she can also offer full table massages if the workplace is set up for it. Her client base extends beyond Anchorage, too—she and her team have traveled to events in Nome, Prudhoe Bay, and many places in between.

Increasing Demand Sparks New Business

Brigmon says she started Balance and Restore after learning there was more demand for on-location chair massage than the number of therapists working in that field. She said she fell in love with the field.

"Especially after seeing the need for healing and hearing the grateful feedback from the staff," she says. "I knew it was the direction I wanted my career to take."

Brigmon plans to offer an online sign-up portal soon, but currently works with four corporate clients on a recurring basis and handles sign-ups by email and telephone. She contracts with other licensed massage therapists from Oriental Healing Arts to

provide massage when more than one pair of hands is needed.

"Several of them are trained in Tui-Na, a type of therapeutic massage done in Chinese hospitals," Brigmon says.

That type of massage involves deep acupressure along the body's meridian lines in the area of the pain. Brigmon says she experiences tendonitis in her elbow, for example, and a Tui-Na trained massage therapist who treats her begins at her shoulder and works toward the elbow.

"It can be a little painful when you get it done," she says, "but I just got it done yesterday and today I'm pain-free."

A study published in the April 2008 *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* showed people with carpal tunnel syndrome, another common repetitive movement injury, saw improved strength and function and decreased symptoms when they received twice-weekly massages for six weeks. A more recent study showed reduced pain and increased grip strength in adults who received weekly massage targeting hand pain over a four-week period. The patients also reported less anxiety and depressed mood and decreased sleep disturbances in that study, which was published in *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* in March 2011.

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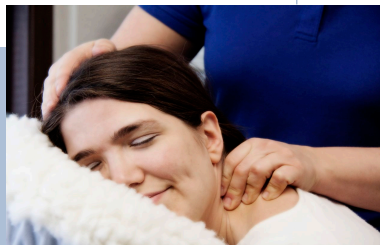
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Brigmon and her team offer a range of other clinical massage specialties, including Thai reflexology and Thai yoga massage.

"We also incorporate a lot of manual lymph massage while we do chair massage. That helps with immunity," she says.

One of the problems with sitting at a desk for hours at a time, Brigmon says, is that the lymphatic system isn't circulating, moving toxins through and out of the body. Massage can get those toxins moving again, she says.

"If you get a massage every week or every other week, you're going to be healthier than someone who doesn't get one," Brigmon says.

Studies back her stance. A study in the October 2010 *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* showed that even a single session of massage therapy produces measurable biologic effects on the immune system, specifically looking at hypothalamic, pituitary, adrenal, and immune function.

Brigmon says her team also brings other alternative therapies, such as cupping, essential oils, ultrasonic tuning forks, TENS units, Chinese pain topicals, and patches.

"Our goal is not only to relax and rejuvenate our corporate clients but to balance the body and restore wellness," Brigmon states on her website, BalanceRestore.org.

Morale Booster

Rosie Drew, a human resources generalist at Chugach Electric Association, says she encouraged Chugach to bring in Hickok and her therapists after seeing the popularity of the massage program at another employer.

Therapists from Workplace Massage visit Chugach Electric every Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., offering ten- or twenty-minute appointments. Drew says happier employees make for a happier workplace.

Drew says she regularly schedules a twenty-minute massage with Hickok or one of the other massage therapists that come in.

"It's really good if you have a stressful kind of job and you tend to hunch your shoulders or tighten up a lot. Even though it's a short-time massage, it really does relax your shoulders and arms," Drew says.

It's a good stress reliever for those who elect to participate, she says. Chugach provides a conference room for the chairs to be set up, and Hickok also attends the electric cooperative's September health fair and provides free five-minute massages.

"For the general wellness of our employees, I think it's a good thing," Drew says.

Brigmon says the corporations she works with provide massage for free to their employees, seeing an overriding healthcare benefit from the service.

"A lot of studies have determined that people who get massage on a regular basis,



Photo by Chelsea Marie Photography/Courtesy of Balance & Restore

Massage therapists Balance & Restore owner Rose Brigmon, left, and Seraphim Stapleton delivering corporate massage therapy to clients at an Anchorage business.

because they're not getting sick, have fewer sick days and less doctor visits. That, alone, can save a corporation thousands of dollars a year," she says.

Booming Industry

Although Hickok and Brigmon are the only businesses in Anchorage focused solely on providing on-location massages, several other massage therapists do provide the service on an occasional basis.

Kirk Wilson, operator of the Alaska Massage Institute and Medical Massage Alaska, says he works with a few businesses to provide on-location massages at people's workplace and at special events like a DoTerra Essential Oils gathering or bridal shower.

At Medical Massage Alaska, Wilson and his team provide craniosacral therapy (providing relief by focusing on certain areas of the skull) in addition to deep-tissue massage, myofascial release (using gentle, sustained pressure on the myofascial connective tissue) for injuries and rehabilitation, and therapeutic medical massage treatments, billable to insurance.

"The client is determining whether this quality of touch, via chair massage, is what they would pay for, for an hour or ninety minutes on the table," he says.

Wilson formerly taught massage therapists at the Alaska Career College and worked

with the state to develop advanced certifications for massage therapy in the state.

The state developed a Board of Massage Therapists in 2014, requiring all massage therapists to be licensed. Wilson says when he first started teaching in Alaska, about eight years ago, there were perhaps a few hundred working massage therapists. Now, the state shows more than nine hundred licensed therapists.

If the popularity of on-location chair massage grows, Wilson says he may add a workshop to the Alaska Massage Institute curriculum, focusing on chair massage.

"I had not ever received a chair massage when I was going to school," Wilson says. "Typically, it's part of the initial curriculum. However, I feel it doesn't have enough time in the initial curriculum to [teach] all the things you can do. You can also turn them around and have them sit [in the chair] like in a La-Z-Boy."

Wilson says he envisions more businesses stepping forward to invite massage therapists into their workplace, as it's a low-cost and easy way to make employees happier and boost retention.

"It is such a great benefit for the business," he says. ☉

Freelance journalist Rindi White lives in Palmer.