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Lee County School District may get own school nurses and doctors

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The school district may consider hiring its own physicians, nurses and medical staff for a health clinic and small-scale pharmacy.

With a patient pool of nearly 10,000 employees, plus their spouses and dependents, a district-only medical office could save money and provide better service than many private physicians, officials say.

Last year, Lee County schools spent \$68 million on visits to doctor's offices, prescriptions and medical procedures, and those expenditures are projected to rise 9 percent this year. Lee is self-insured, so any increases in health care costs come right from pockets of the district and its employees.

The district already has a wellness center that coordinates fitness programs, health seminars and vaccinations in hopes that a healthier work force translates into lower medical costs and fewer missed days of work due to illness.

Tennessee-based CareHere made a pitch to Lee, predicting the school district could save \$20 million over three years by having employees avoid private physicians for non-emergencies and dispensing drugs without marking up prices.

Glen Volk, a consulting actuary with Healthcare Analytics, presented information Thursday to the district's insurance task force, outlining the pros and cons of do-it-yourself medical centers.

"People have to use it, or you'll end up spending a lot of money on it," Volk said. "That's the single most critical factor to success - getting them there."

The task force plans to solicit firms willing to provide basic information on running a clinic.

A growing number of government agencies, including the Lee County Sheriff's Office and Charlotte County government, have developed in-house clinics to combat rising health care costs. Co-pays are eliminated, and appointments are booked in 20-minute intervals, with no double-booking or delays in the waiting room.

"People want convenience," said Lee Sheriff Mike Scott. "Free and convenient is where it's at."

Scott said weekly utilization has ranged from 95 percent to 100 percent since the clinic opened in August.

Shandra Backens, a fifth-grade teacher at Harns Marsh Elementary, said she definitely would use a district-run clinic. She visits the doctor about five times per year, but says most medical offices maintain hours that aren't convenient to school employees.

"It would be great to have a place where we can walk in and get free health care in a convenient location," Backens said.

The school district's clinic likely would be located inside district headquarters at 2855 Colonial Blvd. or

the former administration building at 2055 Central Ave. in Fort Myers. Employees, spouses and dependents would still be permitted to see private physicians and specialists.

Volk said the biggest plus of these centers are guaranteed appointment times and offices that aren't overloaded with patients.

"The average visit is usually 20 to 30 minutes," said Volk, who works with Lee schools on its insurance and medical issues. "You don't get that if you see a regular doctor."

In May, the Citrus County School District, which has 2,400 employees, opened a clinic that features four exam rooms, X-ray machines, a triage room and conference room.

"They drive from all over the county because the costs and service are good," said Dave Stephens, Citrus' director of risk management and employee relations.

Although Lee schools have a wellness center, a 2009-10 survey of district employees found 82 percent had poor eating habits that put them at risk, 67 percent weren't getting enough exercise and 64 percent were overweight or obese.

"It's up to each person, and all you can do is provide them resources and encouragement," said Lisa Brown, employee wellness coordinator.
