

Cities find savings by opening own health clinics for government workers

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When 12-year-old Anna Koeser hurt her right ankle dancing a few weeks ago, the Delray Beach resident went to the city's health clinic on Northeast Third Avenue. She was X-rayed and fitted with a brace.

The visit didn't cost her a dime.

Anna gets free care because her father, Bruce Koeser, is one of the 400 out of 800 city employees signed up with the city's health-care clinic. Delray Beach city employees and dependents don't pay a co-payment. Generic drugs are free. So are physicals, primary care such as stitches and preventative care for cholesterol and diabetes. The staff will even help a patient quit smoking.

"We want the best health care for our employees and dependents. Plus, the city gets lower health-care costs," said Bruce Koeser, the city's director of human resources.

Frustrated by runaway health-care costs and sinking revenue, many government agencies are opening on-site health clinics.

The Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office and Port St. Lucie have similar programs. West Palm Beach is considering the plan.

The Palm Beach Gardens council on Nov. 4 plans to consider a clinic for its 470 employees. If approved, the clinic could open for 30 hours a week in January at Fire Station 3, the site of the 9/11 memorial.

What's in it for taxpayers?

A healthy employee is a less expensive employee, said Karen Lukhaub, director of risk management and purchasing in Lakeland, which opened its clinic three years ago.

About half who enrolled the first year didn't even have a doctor. When examined, some were borderline diabetics. Others showed heart attack symptoms.

"These people are walking time bombs. We must get to them before they need an outside doctor," Lukhaub said.

In Apopka, employee sick time has been reduced since its clinic opened 18 months ago, said Apopka Chief Administrative Officer Richard Anderson. To encourage the 375 employees to sign up, their pay is not reduced when they go to the clinic.

Rob Palladino, a Gardens clinical pharmacist who lost a bid for city council earlier this year, said spending more while budgets are being slashed is a bad idea.

"Why are government employees special? It bothers me they do not pay anything for the clinic," Palladino said.

Last year, Gardens paid about \$5.8 million in health-care costs, which increases about 10 percent a year, said Finance Administrator Allan Owens.

A minimum of 20 percent of the city's employees must sign up in the first six to nine months for the program to work, said Ray Tomlinson, vice president of Florida operations for CareHere, the Brentwood, Tenn.-based company that would provide the medical care for the Gardens program.

All the communities contacted reported at least a 50 percent enrollment.

Gardens would provide the building and pay CareHere up to \$621,000 to provide the medical staff for the first year. Savings could be as high as \$670,000 for the first year in lower costs for medicine, medical care and insurance, City Manager Ron Ferris said.

"The savings would not come right away. The saving would be in improving long-term health of employees," Ferris said.

If the Gardens council approves the clinic, acceptance from employees might not be easy, warn city officials where the clinics are in use.

Employees aren't thrilled about the risk-assessment tests - body mass index, blood pressure, vital signs - required to join the program. Those with health issues must make periodic visits to monitor their condition.

Others want to keep their own doctor. Still others worry that signing up means the city's management has access to their medical records, city officials said.

"We explained to employees (Ocala) is subject to the same HIPPA confidentiality requirements as a private doctor," said Lyn Viselli, Ocala's benefits manager.

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