

Working TOWARD Wellness

Businesses look to programs as way to control health costs

With the already steep cost of health insurance projected to rise sharply with the continued implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, businesses are looking harder than ever at ways to manage costs.

One tool that continues to gain traction is the workplace wellness program, which can exist in many different forms.

Wellness programs, while difficult to measure from a budgetary standpoint, become a little easier to appreciate when analyzing long-term organization trends or reflecting on the positive impacts in employees' lives.

Grove City Medical Center started a wellness program about 20 years ago to promote employee health, but for about the past five years, it has adopted a more formal approach that offers incentives for employee participation and results.

Employees have a chance to lower their contribution toward their annual health care premium from 21 percent to 9 percent, or what amounts to a savings of about \$1,500, according to human resources director Don Henley.

The only requirement for those

who participate is an annual screening that can help to identify potential health problems.

After that, the 280 or so employees on the organization's health plan may choose the degree of their involvement toward reaping maximum savings. Those who have a problem area identified, such as high blood pressure, have a year to improve their health and qualify for the lower contribution.

The program has earned a pair of recent awards: one for the care of its own employees from the Hospital Association of Pennsylvania, and the other as a top-ranked participant with Interactive Health, a national wellness services provider.

From a budgetary standpoint,

the program costs about \$160 per year for each employee who participates, which is a small amount when considering the hospital spends about \$3 million annually to provide health care for its employees.

So how does that impact the bottom line?

"I'm not here to say that I can prove it does," Henley said. "All I know is it improves the individual person's life."

Nuclear medicine technologist Amanda Jones recently lost more than 40 pounds. The program encouraged her to eat healthier and even take the opportunity to exercise on treadmills in the cardiac rehab area during her lunch breaks.

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Don Henley, human resources director for Grove City Medical Center, says the center started a wellness program about 20 years ago to promote employee health. However, over the past five years, it has adopted a more formal approach that offers incentives for employee participation and results.

Amanda Jones is a nuclear medicine technologist and recently lost more than 40 pounds through diet and exercise. She uses the treadmill in cardiac rehab to get some cardio exercise in during her lunch break at the Grove City Medical Center.

DELIVERING THE GOODS

Data transfer technology transforms health care

Technology makes the modern delivery and convenience of health care possible.

But there's a lot of planning and infrastructure involved in sending an MRI from a remote location to a doctor at a hospital miles away.

Health care providers rely on high-speed networks that can move large amounts of data quickly, securely and with as little delay as possible.

To make that a reality, care providers partner with Internet service providers to establish

metro Ethernet networks that establish direct links between facilities.

"As far as we see, it's an instant and direct connection with the way they transmit data," Roger Lutz, Butler Health System's director of network operations, said.

All of the health system's locations are linked to the main data center at Butler Memorial Hospital.

Instead of using typical means of Internet transmission, businesses such as BHS buy di-

rect connections between facilities.

This way, data does not have to pass through extra switches and routers between physical locations.

Lutz said BHS has expanded its network dramatically during the past five years as connecting with itself, and others, becomes commonplace in the field.

Digitization of health care records and then sharing them with other health systems has driven this movement.

But the expanse of medical imaging also plays a large part.

MRIs, CT scans, X-rays and videos create large digital files, which require significant bandwidth to transmit electronically.

"You need a lot available when you send the big files or pull the big files for viewing so you don't have to wait a long time," Lutz said.

He said having a metro

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Jim McKain

CARE CONUNDRUM

Companies react to changes wrought by health reform

Health care costs have long been a hot topic for businesses, but since President Barack Obama signed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010, a timeline of mandated change has been in place.

First, with a goal of improving the quality of care and making it more affordable, health care providers have faced various penalties that reduce reimbursements from federal programs like Medicare and Medicaid.

Now, many of the provisions of the law aimed at making health insurance eas-

ier to obtain for individuals and small businesses are starting to play out.

On Oct. 1, the public health care exchanges opened for individuals to enroll in a health-care plan by Jan. 1 or face a federal tax penalty.

That has set the stage for employers, whose mandate was bumped back to Jan. 1, 2015.

At that time, businesses that employ the equivalent of 50 or more full-time individuals will be required to offer a federally acceptable plan.

Leading up to that, small business-

es will have the option of enrolling in the Small Business Health Options Program, or SHOP, and may be eligible for some tax credits.

However, as the law continues to be written, much uncertainty surrounds how to plan properly, frustrating business owners and human resources professionals alike.

Here is a look at what employers large and small have been doing.

Large businesses

Larger employers, as long as they

offer health insurance that meets AFA requirements, are largely unaffected. However, they are still seeing an impact.

Jim McKain, human resources manager for Penn United Technologies, said the Affordable Care Act has not affected the way the company does business, but the law has increased the company's administrative burden.

The precision manufacturer in Jefferson Township employs about 580 and offers a comprehensive plan that

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