

Employers Weigh Onsite Clinics As Insured Ranks Set To Grow..... 2

Employers Weigh Onsite Clinics As Insured Ranks Set To Grow

By **Dinah Wisenberg Brin**
Of DOW JONES NEWSWIRES
766 words
26 August 2010
14:09
Dow Jones News Service
DJ
English
(c) 2010 Dow Jones & Company, Inc.

Five minutes from the main headquarters of the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, employees of the Florida law-enforcement agency can, at no cost to them, swiftly see a doctor in a new medical center equipped with gun lockers and space to doff boots and bullet-proof vests.

If the physician prescribes medicine, an officer can leave with drug in hand.

The two-month-old West Palm Beach medical office, operated and staffed by **health** insurer Cigna Corp. (CI) solely for the sheriff's department's 4,100 employees, reflects a growing interest among employers in improving employee access to **health** care and offering services aimed at improving overall **health** and productivity.

Interest in such facilities may intensify as some 32 million uninsured Americans are poised to gain coverage in the next few years under the new **health** overhaul, exacerbating what many experts see as a growing U.S. physician shortage that can hinder access to good medical care and lengthen waits to see a doctor.

"I would expect the primary-care shortage to worsen," said Thomas Richards, Cigna's senior vice president for U.S. products and leader of the insurer's implementation of the **health** overhaul law. In response, some large employers are considering putting clinics on site, according to Richards.

"I think that trend will grow as employers look at employees needing to take time off to sit and wait for a doctor," he said.

Cigna runs 22 employer **health** centers ranging in services from **health**-coaching to primary care, and provides a workplace **health** center for its own employees.

Drug-store chain Walgreen Co. (WAG), the industry leader in workplace **health** services after buying the two largest site operators in 2008, runs some 380 centers that vary in scope from fitness centers to pharmacies to nurse-practitioner or physician care. More than half are staffed by physicians, according to Peter Hotz, group vice president for Walgreen's **health** and wellness division.

While the recession dampened growth following the purchases, in the last 12 months "we've seen demand pick up quite a bit because companies realize that these services save them money, both in the short term and in the long term," Hotz said. Walgreen has seen growth across the board, he said, including a healthy uptick in physician-directed sites.

Walgreen, with such workplace **health**-center clients as Walt Disney Co. (DIS) and Toyota Motor Corp. (TM), expects to see steady, double-digit percentage growth in the number of sites, Hotz told Dow Jones Newswires.

"There is a concern about the shortage of primary-care physicians," he said.

A Walgreen spokesman cited a 2008 Fuld & Co. research paper that estimated **onsite** clinics then served 4% of people under age 65 in the U.S., and predicted they will serve more than 10% of that population by 2015. Fuld reported that 24 vendors then were managing some 2,200 clinics for 1,200 clients, and said such centers can cut employers' **health** costs.

Walgreen clients pay for the costs of running the facilities, plus a management fee, so there's no incentive for doctors to see a certain number of patients. That aligns the interests of the facility with employers, Hotz said. Some clients provide **health**-center access for dependents as well as employees.

The Cigna-run facility opened by the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office currently serves active employees only.

"It was a couple of years in the planning. The main reason we opened it is to get our employees healthier and get an opportunity to seek **health** and wellness conveniently and cost-free," said Hilda Gonzalez, the agency's risk manager. The office had been hearing complaints from workers about hours-long waits to see their doctors. Some people went only when sick, or went to emergency rooms because they couldn't see their physicians.

The sheriff's department wanted employees to receive timely care and preventive care that would help avert acute and chronic conditions, she said.

One physician, two nurse practitioners and four medical assistants staff the center, where employees can be in and out in 30 minutes for routine care, don't have to sit next to someone they've arrested, and have bigger examining rooms and a secure place to store uniforms and weapons, said Gonzalez.

"It was designed with our employees in mind," she said.

-By **Dinah Wisenberg Brin**, Dow Jones Newswires; 215-656-8285; dinah.brin@dowjones.com [08-26-10 1409ET]

Document DJ00000020100826e68q000f4