

The Keller Citizen

School districts seek lower healthcare costs

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BY SANDRA ENGELLAND

sengelland@star-telegram.com

In the face of skyrocketing healthcare costs, Keller and Northwest school district officials are implementing measures to soften the blow to district and employee budgets.

In Keller ISD, premiums will rise an average of 20 percent in January even after the board approved \$1.4 million from district coffers to keep the rate from climbing even higher. To try to better control costs, KISD's health insurance provider, United Healthcare, will employ a third-party coordinator full time beginning in January to work with employees on health and wellness issues.

"We know you can't just look at revenue; you have to look at ways to mitigate costs," said Penny Benz, assistant superintendent of human resources.

The coordinator will frequently go to campuses and KISD facilities to work with employees on health education, nutrition, diabetes management, tobacco cessation and the importance of early detection and treatment for chronic diseases.

"This person will create a culture of awareness throughout the district," Benz said.

Employees will be offered personal health assessments which could lead to reduced premiums or rebates for those who participate. Benz said that all information collected by the coordinator would be subject to medical privacy laws.

"We want to encourage a positive, supportive environment for employees," she said.

The district health insurance is self-funded and not part of TRS Active Care, a state-wide program available to school districts through the Teacher Retirement System of Texas. Benz said the TRS premiums are higher and make districts less attractive to those seeking employment.

After seeing increases from 9 to 12 percent a year over the past several years, officials are seeking ways to make costs more reasonable without abandoning the self-funding model. For 2014, the monthly increase on the mid-range plan for a KISD employee will be \$8.30 while those enrolled as families will pay \$120 more each month.

Benz said the district has seen a rise in healthcare claims by nearly 20 percent over the past several years for everything from premature births and cancer to diabetes and emergency room visits. A trip to the emergency room can cost \$1,000 more than a visit to the doctor's office. Keller has about 3,600 employees, with 2,400 enrolled in the KISD health insurance plan.

Northwest's medical clinic

Keller administrators are looking for other ways to reduce expenses, including the possibility of establishing an on-site or near-site clinic for employees. Last week, KISD officials visited Northwest's Employee Health and Wellness Center, a medical clinic for staff members.

Kitty Poehler, NISD executive director of personnel services, said the clinic, which opened in fall 2011, provides routine medical exams, lab tests and small samples of a number of generic medications to employees and dependents enrolled in the plan free of charge.

"Our employees love it because it allows them to receive medical care at no additional cost," Poehler said.

Because the clinic is centrally located in the district, staff members can make appointments during lunch and conference periods in addition to before and after school. The proximity and availability of appointments mean teachers and other staff members miss less work time which reduces the impact on students in the classroom, Poehler said.

Managed by Care ATC with fees paid by employee premiums, the clinic is staffed by a doctor, two physician assistants and a receptionist and treats from 16 to 25 patients each day.

Poehler said that the clinic paid for itself in 13 months in terms of controlling costs. In the past few years, NISD employees have seen annual increases of 3 to 5 percent in their health insurance premiums. Of 1,826 employees, 1,147 participate in the medical plan.

Both Northwest and Keller officials plan to host community health fairs in the coming months to encourage healthy habits in families. Keller's community health fair is set for Dec. 7 and Northwest will hold its second annual community health fair in January. At both events, participants can receive free blood pressure and bone density screenings and see displays created by students on health and wellness issues.