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Colorado employers are opening work-site health clinics for faster, better care

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A small but growing number of Colorado employers are taking matters into their own hands and opening up medical clinics on their work sites.

The clinics come as employers complain about workers missing time to try to get in for doctors' appointments — or becoming increasingly unproductive as they wait for days to get into overbooked primary-care offices.

Typically contracted out to medical companies, work-site clinics are found most often at larger, self-insured companies that have a spare room or space on their campus to turn into a health-care area, said [Donna Marshall](#), executive director of the Colorado Business Group on Health, a nonprofit that provides health information to employers.

But now, some smaller firms are beginning to combine their resources and offer “near-site” clinics.

Such clinics often grow from the concerns of employers who self-fund their health coverage who want to reduce their mounting medical costs and increase the quality of care, said [Mike Ferguson](#), COO of the Self Insurance Institute of America in Simpsonville, South Carolina.

Such employers notice that if it's quicker and easier for their workers to access care, they're more likely to do it. So they bring in doctors during work hours to treat patients who otherwise might skip work or just let their conditions go worse.

And those who open on-site clinics often find increased productivity, reduced absenteeism and, most importantly, slower growth of health-care costs, Marshall said.

“Employers are looking at primary care, and they’re looking at the health system. And they’re saying, ‘This is not a system that is accessible to me as a purchaser,’” Marshall said. “Work-site clinics are definitely a trend of the future, though it’s been happening for a long time.”



Nicki Leo, Wellness Coordinator for the City of Westminster, has her blood pressure taken by nurse Linda Buffington from CareHere (the company that manages the on-site clinic).

Bringing down barriers

A number of companies have popped up to serve the desires of businesses to offer these clinics.

Nashville-based CareHere.com operates more than 200 clinics in 26 states, including Colorado clinics ranging from one for Phil Long car dealerships in Colorado Springs to clinics at large Brookdale assisted-living facilities.

The average size of the businesses offering such clinics is 1,500 workers, and Care.Here's goal is to cut the annual increase in health-care costs significantly, said Ernie Clevenger, president of the company.

He's found it easy to recruit doctors to the clinics because those physicians tend to spend more time with patients than in typical settings, and the reimbursement often is higher through the monthly per-employee fee, he said.

And not only do the clinics attract people who have come down with recent illnesses or injuries, they also bring in workers who may not have seen a doctor for 10 years because they haven't found the time to do so.

"To you and me, the barrier may be nothing," Clevenger said. "But to others, it's something."

While some private companies offer such clinics in Colorado, they are more common at public-sector workplaces, Marshall said. That's partly because Colorado has fewer large corporations and more small businesses than other states, she noted.

Roughly 320 schools, local governments and special districts are part of the Colorado Employer Benefit Trust, a self-funded health-benefit trust administered by Willis Towers Watson (Nasdaq: WLTW), a large consulting brokerage firm.

The CEBT contracted with Marathon Health in 2014 to operate three such clinics that were near multiple members' locations in 2014, and it experienced enough success that it opened three more of them this year, said Bobby Otte, executive vice president with Willis Towers Watson of Denver.

The clinics target people who aren't currently receiving health care, so there is little conflict with local primary-care doctors who worried about losing patients to them, especially since the clinics are staffed by nurse practitioners and physicians' assistants rather than doctors, Otte said.

CEBT opted to open them in places with fewer numbers of local providers, such as Glenwood Springs and Rifle and Greeley.

"The goal was better access for employees to get health care, and that worked great," Otte said. "The added benefit was the employee satisfaction. Employees love the fact that there's providers there just for them, and they want to get to know the providers."

Such clinics also help to get workers into wellness programs at a higher level, said Lili Tenney, deputy director for the Center for Health, Work and Environment at the Colorado School of Public Health in Aurora. Employers then can track the success of those wellness programs, and that is inspiring more companies to look into it, she said.

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