

Sarasota County manages costs with long-term focus on employee wellness

Sarasota County Government Customer Success Story



OVERVIEW

Customer: Sarasota County Government
Population: The municipal government, excluding schools, has a workforce of 3,900 employees who provide local support services to nearly 340,000 permanent residents.

Results

- Achieved medical cost trend of 6.95 percent for plan year 2004 – 2005 and no increase for plan year 2005 – 2006, versus national trends of 13.7 percent and 12.4 percent, respectively
- 29 percent of employees have completed a health risk assessment

Business Need

- Increase employee wellness and reduce health risks and costs

Solution

- Extensive array of on-site wellness programs and online programs available through Aetna's Simple Steps To A Healthier Life®
- Employee incentives for completing online health risk assessments, preventive care and healthy living programs
- Predictive modeling to identify employees with high health risks
- Aetna's MedQuery®, powered by ActiveHealth Management, to ensure patient safety by preventing errors and omissions
- Targeted intervention, including disease management, outreach and education, for high-risk employees

Customer success story

Changing a deeply rooted mind-set

Sarasota County is a picturesque area on the southwest Gulf coast of Florida. The County Government offers cafeteria-style benefits that allow employees to choose those that best fit their personal and family needs.

Like most municipalities, Sarasota County employees were accustomed to heavily subsidized benefits offerings with minimal out-of-pocket costs. For many, benefits had become an entitlement. And worse, employees lacked awareness of what medical coverage and services cost, and what drove those costs.

In 1999, the county leaders went through some thoughtful analysis of its benefits programs, taking into account growing health care expenditures and the personal health and wellness of its employees.

The county's prior approach to setting contribution rates varied. One of its first steps was establishing a fixed contribution strategy. The county currently pays 85 percent of the premiums for employees and 55 percent for dependents. But county leaders knew that this change alone would not drive the behavior changes needed nor address the healthy lifestyle issues.

The opportunity was clear: To reduce costs, employees needed to become engaged in both their health care spending and in reducing their health risks.

“Making the connections between medical costs, health risks and personal financial security is the key,” said Steve Marcinko, manager of employee benefits and wellness for Sarasota County. “We need to promote the understanding that health risks, many of which are modifiable, drive health utilization and cost, ultimately affecting personal financial security in later years of life.”

The three-legged stool: Achieving balance through wellness, education and support

In partnership with Aetna, Sarasota County set out on its path to raise employee awareness of health costs and the importance of living healthy lifestyles, while continuing to offer quality health care coverage at affordable prices. Its approach was to focus on wellness, education and consumer support.

The first step was to weave wellness into the fabric of the county's culture.

While one obvious goal of the county's wellness program is to reduce costs, Marcinko said that is not the primary message. *“First and foremost, wellness is about people and improving the quality of life,”* he said.

So, the county's program places heavy emphasis on personal outcomes. Employees have access to five fitness facilities, a monthly health newsletter, and regular classes on topics ranging from stress management and exercise to healthy cooking.

But the county doesn't just offer access to wellness programs; it extends the support through on-site nurses who provide blood pressure and other screenings, as well as healthy lifestyle guidance. Employees also receive help to stop smoking, including coverage for medications and treatments through a local specialist, as well as smoking cessation courses and materials.

Making connections between costs and choices

All during the county's work to expand and integrate its wellness and intervention programs, it steadily educated employees about how the connections between their healthy behaviors and health care choices relate to the premiums.

“It is critical that participants understand how personal health care utilization fits into the premium equation,” said Marcinko. “We explained their percentage cost share of premiums and how their lifestyle choices directly impact personal utilization and ultimately premium cost.”

Using data to power decisions and interventions

The greatest success in Sarasota County's program was the impact of health data and supportive outreach to drive changes.

Aetna's utilization management program forms the foundation. Sarasota County employees who become hospitalized for certain conditions have a special team of clinical nurses from Aetna acting to facilitate access to appropriate and efficient care. Through discharge planning, Aetna personnel assist members in obtaining the resources they need after leaving the hospital. Nurses also maintain contact with members who have certain conditions to follow up on instructions the members received upon leaving the hospital.

Another offering in the county's health benefits menu is Aetna's Simple Steps to a Healthier Life®, an interactive online health and wellness program that can help employers enhance the health and productivity of their employees and support a more complete system of care.

The first step in participating is the completion of in-depth health risk assessment, which yields revealing, yet actionable information for the individual.



For those who approved it, the results of the assessment were shared with Aetna nurses and the county's nurses who use it to help guide the employee to programs that will address their health needs.

The other data-supported efforts that are helping drive down costs are:

- Pinpointing employees that have high health risks through the use of Aetna's predictive modeling capabilities;
- Delivering targeted intervention and disease management to high-risk employees;
- Identifying gaps in care with Aetna's MedQuery® program, powered by ActiveHealth Management's CareEngine®; and
- Aetna Rx Check® to increase compliance with prescription medications, ensure safety and identify cost-savings opportunities.

“Quality educational courses and materials, accessible fitness centers and effective communications are all core components of a successful wellness program,” said Marcinko, “but access to quality data around health status and the ability to integrate it into practical application for plan participants is what makes the greatest impact.”

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