

# Health coaches help workers, save companies cash

Harry Wessel | Sentinel Staff Writer September 10, 2007

His weight had been a problem for several years, but it wasn't until December that Sengpheth Vongsomsack learned from a company-mandated annual physical that he was borderline diabetic.

A sales-finance lender with BB&T Corp. in Orlando, the 30-year-old Vongsomsack took the news as a wake-up call.

And he didn't have to look far for help: All 29,000-plus BB&T employees see a nurse at least once a year, and those who need help are assigned their own nurse, or "health coach," whom they see every four months or so.

Vongsomsack credits his health coach with getting him on the right track. He says he's making smarter decisions about what he eats and exercising regularly, walking laps every workday around his south Orlando office building, Company-sponsored health coaches are on the upswing nationwide, benefits experts say, as businesses -- especially large ones -- search for new ways to slow the fast-rising cost of their employees' health insurance.

In Central Florida, big-name employers whose medical coverage offers coaching of one sort or another include BB&T, United Parcel Service and Progress Energy.

Brant Woodard, a call-center manager with UPS in Hillsborough County, isn't overweight but, like Vongsomsack, found out last year that he's at risk of developing diabetes.

A health coach "has kept me on task," said Woodard, 48, who now walks at least four nights a week on a treadmill at home. "You know somebody is going to follow up with you. It's not like a doctor, who tells you what to do but isn't going to follow up."

UPS, which rolled out its program to more than 100,000 nonunionized employees in mid-2006 and to the rest of its 285,000-person work force in February, provides coaches mainly to employees who have, or are at risk of having, diabetes, asthma, coronary heart disease or congestive heart failure.

With its health-care costs rising 7 percent to 8 percent annually, UPS sees coaches and its employee-wellness program as a way to reverse the upward trend, company officials said.

BB&T, which has had health coaching for more than 20 years, estimates it annually spends \$1,100 less per employee in health costs than other banking companies -- about \$8,000 versus the industry average of \$9,100.

Although the BB&T wellness program that features health coaching is voluntary, more than 90 percent of the company's employees participate, said a company spokeswoman. There's a powerful incentive: Participants receive a 20 percent discount on their share of their monthly health-insurance premium.

BB&T's health-coach program is unusual, however, in that it involves face-to-face contact and often continues for years. The far-more-common coaching method is over the phone and limited to about a year, said Michael Stauffer, director of program development for StayWell Health Management, one of the nation's oldest third-party providers of corporate-wellness programs.

Health coaching "has skyrocketed in the last two to three years," Stauffer said. Once aimed just at employees with chronic health problems, the use of personalized, telephone coaching has since proved to be a cost-effective way to help many employees make lifestyle-behavior changes.

Vongsomsack's personal health coach is Kathy Beasley, an RN for more than a quarter-century, most of that time spent in a hospital setting. For the past 2 1/2 years, she has been with Peak Health, which provides health-coaching services to BB&T and other employers in the Southeast.

"It's a dream job for a nurse, teaching and working with people before they have a heart attack and wind up in a hospital," she said. "This is a nice end to work on."

Jan Dawson, a health coach with UnitedHealthcare, which provides wellness services to UPS, coaches by phone rather than in person.

"I have to be open with people, to be enthusiastic, to talk to them about their personal life, their children, their grandchildren," said Dawson, who works in an Atlanta call center.

UnitedHealth's health-coaching services are growing 30 percent a year, and by the end of this year, 2.5 million people will have access to its health coaches, according to company officials.

Progress Energy, which has about 10,000 employees in Florida and the Carolinas, expanded its health-coaching services in late July from just disease-management cases to all employees.

Instead of offering health-premium discounts, as BB&T does, Progress Energy offers employees \$100 to take a health-risk assessment and an additional \$400 if they achieve or maintain a series of health standards, including a blood-pressure reading of less than 140 over 90 and a cholesterol-to-HDL ratio of less than 4. HDL is the so-called "good cholesterol."

Employees who want coaching receive calls every two months from a StayWell health coach, said a company spokeswoman, who predicted her company would get back about \$3 for every dollar it spends on its wellness program.

"But in any case," she said, "we think it's the right thing to do."

Vongsomsack, the BB&T lender, will attest to that. When he saw his health coach in early August, he had lost only 5

pounds since their previous session. But her caliper measurements indicated he had dropped nearly 3 percent of his body fat.

"She said it was the equivalent of losing 15 pounds," Vongsomsack said. Because of his workouts, "I gained 10 pounds of muscle."

He knows he still needs to lose an additional 60 pounds, but with Beasley's help and encouragement, he thinks he's on his way. In addition to his workday walks, "I've started jogging and bike riding in my neighborhood on the weekends."

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