

what's working

employee care center provides
personalized, coordinated care

by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**

At a time when most people were forced to cancel health care appointments or scramble to find virtual care because of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees of the city of Everett, Washington had a brand-new resource at the ready.

The city had opened a near-site health care center for its employees in January 2020, just two months before a health emergency was declared in the state of Washington due to the spread of COVID-19.

"If anything good came out of COVID, it did help get our employees in the door because all of a sudden they had limited access to health care," said Marcy Hammer, the city's human resources (HR) manager. "They thought, 'My employer has this tremendous service that most employers are not offering.' It really illustrated what the health care center could do for them. Once they go there, I don't think I've heard anybody say they're never going back there again."

Located about 25 miles north of Seattle, Washington, the city of Everett has 1,100 benefits-eligible staff, serving a population of roughly 111,000.

Multiple Goals

The idea for an employee care center surfaced about seven years ago as city officials looked for ways to provide better care for employees and offer attractive benefits while keeping costs in check. Health care costs are the city's second-largest expense behind salaries.

"As an employer, we're always looking for innovative ways to keep our benefits competitive, and that's becoming even more important now," Hammer said. "Public employers have the reputation for great benefits and retirement plans in order to stay competitive within the market."

City officials thought they could focus on primary care, specifically cutting down on unnecessary referrals to specialists, and an employee care

center was one strategy that could help, Hammer noted.

The city first issued a request for proposals for a near-site clinic in 2015 and ultimately selected Vera Whole Health, using its advanced primary care model, as its partner. After a change in city leadership in 2018, the city was ready to move forward with the employee health care center.

Advanced Primary Care Services

The Vera Whole Health care center opened in early 2020 with two providers on staff—a physician and a registered nurse practitioner. A second registered nurse practitioner was recently added to meet demand. Employees and their family members—including children ages three and up—who are enrolled in the city's self-insured health plans can use the care center.

The care center is open Monday through Friday. Services provided include preventive care, including an annual whole health evaluation; chronic disease management; acute care; and clinically integrated health coaching and support services, such as on-site labs, provider-dispensed medications, specialty care coordination and advocacy.

The care center recently added preemployment physicals and commercial driver's license (CDL) testing and is considering adding physical therapy services in the future.

"The service is so great, and they're returning for all sorts of other services," Hammer said. "They may go for a flu shot and then end up making their annual whole health appointment at the same time."

The annual whole health evaluation includes a biometric screening, a 30- to 60-minute provider visit, a health summary discussion and clinically integrated health coaching. Employees are encouraged to have their whole health visit annually,



Marcy Hammer
Human Resources Manager,
City of Everett,
Everett, Washington



Jennifer Sargent
General Manager,
Vera Whole Health,
Seattle, Washington

and these appointments are viewed as key to improving employee health.

The city coordinated the opening of the care center with the launch of a new consumer-driven health care plan (CDHP). It is one of two self-funded plans administered by a third-party administrator (TPA) that the city offers. The other self-funded plan is a traditional low-deductible preferred provider organization (PPO) plan. The city also has a fully insured health maintenance organization (HMO) plan, but its members are not eligible to use the care center.

Employees who are enrolled in the self-insured plans are not required to use the care center, but those who do receive all services for free.

The CDHP has a \$1,500 deductible, 80/20 cost sharing and a \$2,500 maximum out-of-pocket cost for a single coverage plan. The city funds a contribution to a voluntary employees' beneficiary association (VEBA) account for each employee to cover most of the deductible. As an extra incentive, employees also receive \$100-\$200 in their VEBA account, depending on their health plan enrollment, if they get their annual whole health evaluation. Spouses/domestic partners who are enrolled in the CDHP plan are also eligible for the incentive.

About 800-900 employees are enrolled in the self-funded plans, and about 45% of those employees are enrolled in the CDHP. Enrollment continues to grow.

Personalized, Coordinated Care

One of the key attributes of the care provided at the center is the integrated care team approach, said Jennifer Sargent, general manager for Vera Whole Health. "We have providers who center on delivering care, but then we're surrounding them with a care team to help make sure that we can deliver appropriate care and do it in a way that's beneficial to the individual."

The providers work with health coaches, behavioral health providers and others to create a customized plan to address all of an individual's needs, she said.

The care model also has an informatics platform that employs data to help the care team develop a detailed picture of member health. For example, the system can identify individuals who haven't seen a primary care provider in a while

or who might be at risk for a chronic condition. The care team can strategize about how to encourage those individuals to schedule a visit.

Through its clinically integrated health coaches, the care team helps individuals through behavior change. Employees meet a health coach during their first annual whole health evaluation and can then choose to follow up with the health coach virtually or in person. Together, they identify any issue the individual wants to work on, whether it's lowering their cholesterol or improving sleep habits.

Care coordination is another important piece. "Although we believe we can deliver 80-90% of care, we know that we may need to refer some patients to other providers," Sargent said. "We make sure that we get them to a place that is high quality and low cost and that the individual actually follows through and gets the care that they need—and then gets back to us so we can help them with that care."

Whole Health Council

An employee council—facilitated by trained staff in collaboration with City of Everett employees and comprised of representatives from city labor groups—provides input on the care center and wellness efforts. The city does not have a formal employee wellness program, but the council brainstorms ideas for how to engage and create a healthier workforce, Hammer said.

The council has provided valuable input on employee communication, she remarked. For example, after hearing about the challenges employees face in getting information, the city hosted six rounds of 25 in-person meetings and presentations on employee benefits for all employees, which had not been done in the past.

Additional engagement efforts have included the following:

- Three off-site flu shot events for employees and their families
- Monthly e-newsletters as well as fliers and postcards that focus on specific health topics
- A four-part email series focusing on care gaps. This series alerts patients who are either behind on an upcoming screening or diagnosed and behind on receiving care for colorectal cancer, diabetes, health coaching or depression. It also is used to remind and encourage members to schedule an appointment with a provider.

During the Pandemic

When the public health emergency was declared, the care center was open only for telehealth visits until May of 2020 when it began offering in-person visits again. “Since then, it’s been a hybrid approach. They are very flexible if somebody does not want to come in—There is always a virtual option,” Hammer said.

In addition, the care center offered COVID-19 testing and vaccines when they became available, which was particularly helpful because city employees are considered essential workers.

About 570 COVID-19 vaccines were administered for employees and their family members in 2021 and, as of January, 465 COVID-19 tests had been administered.

“Through the pandemic, the team has been so great to lean on,” Hammer said. When vaccines were in short supply, the team worked with staff in the environmental health and safety, emergency management and fire departments to distribute any unused doses of the vaccine.

Results

In the first two years of the care center’s operation, the city can point to the following results.

- Generic prescription drug costs dropped 12% within the first year.
- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of city employees and families have engaged with the care center.



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- As of December 31, 2021, more than 7,100 appointments had been provided.
- After the first year, the city saw a 25% increase in preventive health care visits.

Because of the pandemic, Hammer said the city may not have a full picture of how the care center has affected health care costs until the end of this year.

Hammer advised employers that might be considering an on-site or near-site clinic to start talking with stakeholders, including employee unions, even if it’s only at the idea stage. “Start early. Start engaging the key players early,” she said. Partnering with labor groups and administration is key to understanding what benefits employees want and whether they can be sustainable.