

Palm Beach Gardens clinic keeps city workers healthy, saves money; other governments have similar offices

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By [Willie Howard](#) - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

PALM BEACH GARDENS —

The city's Employee Health and Wellness Center is helping employees prevent medical problems by losing weight, improving their diets and making regular visits to a doctor — behaviors that save city taxpayers money on health care.

The city council chose Tennessee-based CareHere! to operate the clinic, which opened in April 2011 in a converted community meeting room at fire station No. 3, as the city staff searched for ways to reduce the rising cost of health insurance claims by city employees and their dependent family members.

"We saw it coming," said Sheryl Stewart, the city's human resources administrator. "We pay our own medical claims. We knew we had to do something."

Results from the first two years of the clinic's operation include a 20 percent drop in hospital admissions by employees and their family members, a reduction in medical insurance claims and lower costs for prescription drugs, many of which are dispensed free of charge to employees at the clinic.

After subtracting the cost of paying CareHere! to staff and operate the clinic, the city saved about \$92,000 on health care during the first year the clinic was in operation and about \$701,000 the second year, according to CareHere! and the city's human resources department.

Having a clinic near city hall encourages Palm Beach Gardens employees to visit the doctor more often than they might otherwise. Early detection of health problems tends to reduce the cost of treating them, said Clay Austin, director of group health for the Florida League of Cities.

Prevention is emphasized at the Palm Beach Gardens clinic. In addition to the doctor, registered nurse and medical assistant on staff at the clinic four days a week, CareHere! offers city employees and their family members access to coaches who encourage them to exercise, improve their diets, quit smoking and manage stress.

A poster in the clinic's reception room encourages employees to "rethink your drink." It shows a variety of popular soft drinks with plastic bags below the containers showing how much sugar each drink contains. Brochures at the clinic suggest alternatives to fast food and offer healthy food-ordering tips such as leaving off the cheese saying "no" to French fries.

Eileen Stephenson, special projects coordinator for Palm Beach Gardens Fire Rescue, went to the city's clinic for treatment of a rash in late 2011 and learned that she had Type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure.

Stephenson started working with a CareHere! nutritionist and followed through on suggestions to exercise more. She started walking regularly and joined a gym.

She has since lost 50 pounds.

"There's no judgment from anybody, and that was a big comfort to me," Stephenson said. "They're very positive and very upbeat."

Employees are not obligated to use the city's clinic, said Keith Bryer, a division chief with Palm Beach Gardens Fire Rescue who served on the committee that established the health and wellness center. Some employees come to the clinic to have blood drawn for laboratory analysis, then have the results sent to their family doctors.

"The convenience of having a health center right here is just huge," Stewart said.

Other cities and government agencies in Palm Beach County, including West Palm Beach, Delray Beach and the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, have similar in-house clinics that promote healthy lifestyles and provide employees with quick access to medical care.

In Delray Beach, city employees and family members who are sick can see a doctor the same day and get free generic drugs at the city's Employee Health & Wellness Center near city hall, Benefits Manager Pat Lewandowski said.

"It's very convenient for our employees," Lewandowski said. "It's a wonderful benefit."

West Palm Beach established its Employee & Family Health Center in 2011 in a building on Fern Street a few blocks south of city hall.

"It saves a ton of money," city spokesman Elliot Cohen said. "If you keep it in house, it's cheaper."

PALM BEACH GARDENS' EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND WELLNESS CENTER

Origin: The city opened its Employee Health and Wellness Center in April 2011 to address rising health-care costs.

Provider: Tennessee-based CareHere!, which operates 28 other employee clinics for government agencies in Florida.

Staff: A doctor, a nurse and a medical assistant are available at the clinic four days a week. Employees and their families also have access to a variety of health coaches, including nutritionists, behavioral health coaches, dietitians, exercise coaches and tobacco-cessation coaches.

How it works: Employees make appointments by phone or online and visit the clinic at fire station No. 3 on Northlake Boulevard. Each appointment is for 20 minutes. Generic drugs are available free to employees and their families.

Employee screening: The clinic staff collects samples for drug tests and performs physical exams used in pre-employment screening.

Results: Hospital admissions by city employees, their spouses and dependents dropped 20 percent during the first two years the clinic was in operation. Annual medical insurance claims dropped by \$150 per employee between 2010 and 2013. Insurance claims for prescription drugs have dropped 9.9 percent since the clinic opened.

Prevention: The clinic works to educate employees and their family members about healthy food choices, the dangers of smoking, the benefits of exercise and managing stress.

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Dr. Michele Deltieure waits for patients in an exam room in the Palm Beach Gardens Employee Health and Wellness Center.



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A health chart on display at the Palm Beach Gardens Employee Health and Wellness Center tells visitors how much sugar may be in their choice of drink.



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Linda Lisk, director of Clinic Operations Linda Lisk, and Jason Tomlinson, its senior director, talk about the Palm Beach Gardens Employee Health and Wellness Center.



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Some medicine are available onsite in the Palm Beach Gardens Employee Health and Wellness Center.