

Ocoee to join growing list of employers opening clinics



Public-works employee Eddie Hornsby pulls down old ceiling during renovations for Ocoee's medical clinic. (GEORGE SKENE, ORLANDO SENTINEL / January 14, 2008)

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Ocoee city workers and their dependents are in for an unusual employee benefit: free doctor visits and free prescription drugs at a soon-to-open clinic across the street from City Hall.

It likely will be early March before the 1,800-square-foot converted home on East Oakland Street is ready for business. The walls are up, but there's still no ceiling or much of anything else completed in what was a three-bedroom residence built in 1958. Once the clinic opens, the 340 employees on the city's group health-insurance plan will be able to see a primary-care physician during their work hours. The clinic, with three exam rooms, a digital X-ray room and a drug dispensary, will not charge a co-payment for visits or for the drugs.

Like a growing number of private employers, local governments are looking at on- or near-site health clinics to help reduce their insurance costs and improve workers' health. Darden

Restaurants, Harris Corp., Lockheed Martin and Rosen Hotels & Resorts are among a number of Central Florida employers with health clinics. Walt Disney World announced just last month it would open an on-site clinic in 2009.

By having a dedicated doctor that the city will pay by the hour, and buying prescription drugs in bulk, "we'll cut our [physician] visit costs and prescription drugs in half," said James Carnicella, Ocoee's director of human resources and risk management.

He boasted that Ocoee would be the first city in Central Florida, and just the second in the state, to open a full-service health clinic for employees and their dependents.

But he might be wrong about that. Palm Bay in Brevard County could beat Ocoee to the punch. It has leased space in the new Colonial Square Shopping Center, about 1 mile from its City Hall, said City Manager Lee Feldman. Employees will have to visit the clinic on their own time, he said, but visits and the prescription drugs that are dispensed will both be free.

Palm Bay's clinic is also expected to open in early March, though it could be a week or two earlier than that.

"Our goal is to keep our folks out of the mainstream of health-care providers for routine medical visits," Feldman said. Palm Bay has roughly 1,800 employees and dependents in its group health plan, nearly three times as many as Ocoee. Palm Bay's 2,500-square-foot clinic will be open 40 hours a week, Feldman said, compared with Ocoee's 16 hours spread over four days.

Both Ocoee's and Palm Bay's clinics will be operated by CareHere, a Tennessee health-care provider that runs 40 employer-based clinics, in both the private and public sectors, in more than a half-dozen states.

That includes the state's first city-owned employer-based medical clinic, in Port St. Lucie in southeast Florida. That one opened last July and serves about 2,300 employees and dependents covered by group health insurance.

All three cities used the same Ocoee health-care consulting company, Crowne Consulting Group, and the clinic model is pretty much the same at all three, said the company's president, Ray Tomlinson.

Employees stay on their group-insurance plan and are free to use the clinic or stick with their own doctor, Tomlinson said. But the combined incentives of free office visits, free prescriptions and added convenience are a powerful draw. Port St. Lucie's clinic has had a 50 percent utilization rate during its first six months -- double the rate needed to make the clinic work financially, and "we're seeing lower [health-claim] bills each month," said Tamara Williamson, that city's director of human resources.

"The grand plan is to help employees with wellness," said Williamson, who noted that one employee who had gone in for a routine physical was diagnosed with diabetes. "By getting employees in the clinic, and building a relationship with the doctor, we can get them on the path to where more serious health conditions can be discovered -- at no cost to them."

Ocoee's Carnicella is hoping for the same kind of results with the city's new health clinic, which is being renovated largely by city workers at an estimated cost of less than under \$50,000. The clinic will serve numerous functions, he said: primary care, urgent care, pre-employment physicals, drug testing, initial worker's compensation visits, and dispensing a wide assortment of non-narcotic prescription drugs.

Both employees and the city will save money, he predicted, and with the typical office visit lasting less than 45 minutes at the nearby clinic, plenty of time will be saved as well.

"This won't be just a one-piece deal" for employees, Carnicella said. "We will try to get them to be some of the healthiest employees in Central Florida."

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