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Montgomery to try employee health clinic

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The city of Montgomery will try to duplicate the success that Montgomery County has experienced with its employee-only health care clinic, which is into its second year. But the city only will save money if the employees buy into the program.

The city and county officially have partnered in the program, with the Montgomery County Commission approving the contract this week. City employees, who will not have to pay co-pays or deductibles, will be able to use the service starting this coming week.

Mayor Todd Strange is counting on the service being a hit among the city's 2,852 employees.

When Strange crafted the budget for the 2010 fiscal year, he accounted for \$600,000 in savings.

Strange said he based the projected savings on the county's experience. The county saved about \$142,000 in prescription drug, office visits and services from the August 2008 to July of this year. The county also saved more than \$88,000 through unused sick time during that same period of time, according to County Risk Manager Scott Kramer.

Based on the savings from January through August of this year, the county projects to save about \$250,000 in prescriptions and about \$82,000 in office visits and services costs. The county also is expecting to save \$90,000 through unused sick time, according to Kramer.

The partnership isn't just about dollars. It also will mean more convenience for county employees.

Currently, there is only one CareHere clinic, located on South Hull Street. But with the city joining the program, another CareHere clinic will open on Mobile Highway. County and city employees and their dependents can use either clinic.

The South Hull Street clinic will begin taking city employees on Tuesday, and the Mobile Highway clinic will start taking patients on Wednesday.

"The real savings on these clinics are going to be down the road -- three or four years down the road," said John Carnell, the city's risk manager. "That's how we're going to realize savings, by getting people healthier. We probably have a large population that hasn't even been to a doctor."

The city spent about \$2.3 million this past year on office visits, health care services and prescription drugs, according to Carnell. The city plans to spend about \$1.7 million this fiscal year because of the clinics.

Now it's just a matter of getting city employees through the doors of the clinics. Carnell said the city is promoting the clinics from within by doing a payroll stuffer and an e-mail blast.

"We try to incentive them by not charging them for it," Carnell said.

But Carnell said more incentives, like discounts, are likely on the way. He also noted that, unlike private primary care offices where patients usually wait, the clinics use an appointment-system that shortens the wait time.

At this point, the only primary care service the clinics cannot provide is X-rays. Carnell said it wasn't feasible for the city-county to buy the necessary equipment to do X-rays, especially when the majority of employees do not require X-rays each year.

The clinics can provide 173 generic prescription drugs on site. It cannot fill prescriptions from other physicians, and it cannot distribute narcotics, such as painkillers or sleep aids.

A Montgomery physician owns the building on Mobile Highway and will lease it to the city-county for \$2,000 a month.

A private practice will remain on one side of the building, and CareHere will use the other side.

The location was chosen because the building met the needs and it was in a location convenient for a significant number of city and county employees, according to Carnell.

County employees have used the clinic on South Hull Street in downtown since July 2008. The program was expanded to serve retirees about six months ago.

Although the clinic is catching on gradually with retirees, the county has realized significant savings due to the popularity of the clinic among employees.

About 80 percent of the county's work force has used the clinic, according to Kramer.
