

Is Long Branch's new health partner equal or better?

DAN RADEL | DECEMBER 2, 2014

"There is a legal term that says if the Board of Education changes from one carrier to another, the services have to be equal to or better than the former's services," said Paul Eschelbach, president of the Long Branch School Employees Association.

The city's school district left the State Health Benefits Program in October and began to navigate the seas of self-insurance. They hired Integrity Health, the company of former state benefits chief Douglas Forrester, to manage their health insurance and add a Partnership Health Center (PHC) or clinic on campus.

"What we did is create a structure of health care delivery that is anchored in the PHC," said Forrester.

District employees and their dependents can use the PHC for primary care sick visits, check-ups, flu shots, x-rays and referrals. The center can dispense prescription medicine. As far as convenience, Eschelbach said it's been very accommodating.

Members can drop in before classes start to get blood work, for example he said, and not miss the first bell.

Of major concern to the education association's 700 members was getting their former doctors into the network, a request that Eschelbach said is still being worked out, though many former doctors have been added.

Dr. Michael Salvatore, the superintendent of the district, said they opted to leave the state due to rising health care costs and a growing trend in self-insured.

"We were forced to review health care, a major cost center in our total budget, which exceeds \$95 million," said Salvatore.



Dr. Rekha Menon looks over a file in the Partnership Health Center that has opened on the campus of Long Branch High School as a medical facility providing health services to the employees of the Long Branch school district and their families.

The health care costs under the state benefits program were eating up nearly 20 percent of the budget, or \$18 million a year at last count, said Peter Genovese, business administrator for the district. And the cost is expected to jump up by 11 percent this January.

Genovese said the anticipation is self-insurance will save money over time for the district and its employees as yearly increases are anticipated to be less — in the neighborhood of four to five percent — than what the state was offering.

Long Branch is the second Jersey Shore school district to open a PHC run by Forrester. Toms River was the first to do so in 2009.

Bill Doering, business administrator for the Toms River School District, said they are in the final year of a two-year contract with Integrity Health.

He said Toms River district employees make on average 18,000 visits per year to the PHC.

"We could have another company administer a PHC there, but we have had great success with what we have in place now," said Doering.

Integrity Health leases the building space from both districts to operate the PHC.



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Sean Gowers, R.N., looks over medications in the facilities dispensary room.