

ASBURY PARK PRESS

Toms River clinic provides savings to school district

Clinic offers savings to district by providing onsite medical care

By Hartriono B. Sastrowardoyo

November 17, 2009

From hand wrangling to hand washing.

Partnership Health Center, a Toms River Regional School District medical clinic, officially opened Tuesday, with a reception and tour for township, school and other officials. The center is in district offices on Washington Street, a large part of which occupies what used to be the room for Board of Education meetings.

"Altogether, [the] savings allow school district employees and their dependents...to use Partnership [Health Center] for free, with no co-payment, no pharmacy charge and no charge for X-rays or lab work."

"This is a way of dealing with the high cost of health insurance," said Michael J. Ritacco, superintendent of schools. "This allows us to keep our employees healthy, yet be more cost-effective."

The health center is truly a partnership, between the school district; Princeton-based Integrity Health, the health-benefits manager for the district; and Lake Mary, Fla.-based We Care TLC, which develops and manages onsite clinics for small and midsize employers as well as for governmental organizations.

The savings to the school district — Ritacco said the second-highest cost is health care — comes from the ability to provide medical care onsite. About \$6,000 a day has been saved by the district through the use of Partnership Health Care, said Doug Forrester, Integrity Health president. Savings have also been realized through a focus on preventive medicine and fitness, Forrester said. A full-time nurse disease manager is available to provide counseling on managing and reducing chronic ailments as well as provide fitness counseling.

Altogether, those savings allow school district employees and their dependents — which also includes staff, faculty and their dependents from the Seaside Heights school district, where Ritacco is also superintendent — to use Partnership free, with no co-payment, no pharmacy charge and no charge for X-rays or lab work.

Since Partnership opened Oct. 15, about 1,200 patients have been seen. A school employee Monday night was able to come to Partnership and receive care after waiting for a few hours to be seen at a hospital's emergency room, said Elizabeth Papanu, the clinic's manager.

The medical center is meant to be another option for district employees to use and is not mandatory, Forrester said. And while the clinic can take walk-ins, a scheduled appointment is preferred, with the ability to do online scheduling coming soon.

"We can do everything a family practice can do," Papanu said, adding that Toms River is the only school district in Monmouth and Ocean counties to have a health center of this kind.

Partnership houses nine exam rooms, which includes a procedure room. Doctors work with specialists to determine the best treatment options, and all rooms have a computer, allowing for a patient's medical history, from initial consultation to medicines prescribed, to be in a central, easily accessible file. There are no more charts or reams of paper (any paper is scanned and digitized), which not-so-incidentally cuts down on the number of possible errors.

"There are no more charts or reams of paper (any paper is scanned and digitized), which not-so-incidentally cuts down on the number of possible errors."

The pharmacy carries most of the commonly prescribed medications. Lab work and X-rays can be done at the center; the X-rays are also accessible electronically, allowing for easier viewing as well as easier access. In the future, workshops for school employees, such as a seminar on diabetes management, are planned to be held at the center, said Dr. Vincent DeStasio, one of the center's practitioners.

Partnership is open various hours, seven days a week. There is one doctor and one nurse practitioner onsite at all times. The normal complement of employees are five medical assistants, who do the initial consultation; two registered nurses; three nurse practitioners; an X-ray technician; and three doctors, Papanu said.

"Within the next three months, you'll see the investment made come back," said Brian Klepper, adviser to We Care and a health care analyst, to the assembled crowd. "You'll see it in much better quality care and in much lower costs, which in turn will result in a lower taxpayer burden."

ON THE WEB: Visit www.app.com and search "health care" for a photo gallery of the new health center. Visit www.trschools.com/health for more information about Partnership Health Center, www.integrityhealth.com for more information about Integrity Health and www.wecaretlc.com for more information about We Care TLC.

To learn more, please visit www.IntegrityHealth.com

