



Montana Blues first plan in nation to offer advocacy service

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By Dave Burgess

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Montana is the first Blues plan in the nation to offer its employees and clients the independent advocacy service of Health Advocate Inc.

The two companies announced the agreement last October, and signups for BCBSMT clients were first offered Jan. 1. As groups' renewals come up with BCBSMT in 2005, they have the option of selecting the Health Advocate service for a fee.

A rapidly growing young company, Pennsylvania-based Health Advocate said it has relationships with more than 500 employers, unions, third-party administrators, insurers and other organizations nationwide, serving more than 1.5 million people.

Health Advocate does not provide insurance, but its services complement the benefits a health plan offers its members. For instance, Personal Health Advocates, professionally trained registered nurses supported by a team of medical directors and administrative experts, help members identify qualified specialists and institutions. They help coordinate care and offer members help accessing community resources including senior care services for their parents who fall outside traditional health insurance coverage, Health Advocate said.

As the health care world changes, as costs rise and more consumers face making more of their own health care decisions, Health Advocate sees its services playing an increasingly important role. The company also cites advantages to its services such as reduced loss of productivity of employees who find themselves grappling with complicated and costly medical issues and billing problems.

In January, Health Advocate said it had 5,100 subscribers in Montana, which translates to approximately 20,000 members including employees, spouses, children, parents and parents-in-law.

Besides Blue Cross Blue Shield of Montana, other organizations in the state have offered Health Advocate to their employees, including Montana State Bankers Association Group Benefits Trust and Scheels All Sports. Montana Automobile Dealers Association Insurance Trust contracted with Health Advocate in 2003 and covers approximately 4,000 Montanans.

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Montana is Montana's leading health services corporation, with more than 240,000 members and 140,000 Medicare recipients. Its provider network consists of partnerships with more than 1,700 licensed Montana physicians, 56 hospitals and 2,100 allied health care professionals, BCBSMT said.

"We are excited to work with Health Advocate to take the lead in offering an independent advocacy program. In an era where consumers want to be more directly involved in their own health care and get the most from it, Health Advocate is the perfect support service, given its expertise and personalized approach to helping individuals," a BCBSMT official said.

Abbie Leibowitz, M.D., co-founder and Chief Medical Officer of Health Advocate, said, "It is a great opportunity for Health Advocate to partner with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Montana to bring our personalized advocacy services to their clients. BCBSMT, who enjoys a reputation for excellence and innovation, brings significant expertise to our collaborate effort to better serve health care consumers."