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## Healthcare help a bonus perk for some local firms

### Service answers employee queries, freeing up HR staff

KATHY ROBERTSON / STAFF WRITER

A Pennsylvania company will help some Sacramento-area businesses and their workers steer their way through the local healthcare system and get a better bang for their buck this year.

That service, provided by Health Advocate Inc. of Plymouth Meeting, Pa., is now being added to health insurance benefit packages sold to large employers by Benefit Insurance Services, a Sacramento brokerage.

Services range from providing help with medical billing problems to finding the right doctor and getting the treatment they need.

The program is designed to troubleshoot for patients. In doing so, it saves company staff time spent dealing with employee healthcare problems and takes a load off brokers, who are often called in to help.

It's a much different approach from the longtime "Ask a Nurse" phone lines paid for by health plans to offer assistance to their members. Health Advocate is an independent ombudsman, hired here by insurance brokers, not insurance carriers, and the company will do everything from helping workers find senior care for parents to getting a second opinion on treatment for themselves.

"Of all the years I've been doing this, I've seen tools come and go," said Dale Waters, founder and president at Benefit Insurance Services. "These people do the whole thing."

The local company is offering Health Advocate as a free benefit for its larger employer clients this year, part of the packaging brokers do to attract and keep business.

"We're very interested," said Mark Lasher, president of Lasher Auto Group. The Sacramento-based auto dealer has 260 employees. "It makes a lot of sense as an extension of our human resource person."

**The advocate:** The Pennsylvania company was founded in 2001 by five former Aetna executives with a little more than \$3 million of their own and investor money.

The private company was profitable by July 2004. It had \$4.3 million in gross sales in 2004, \$9 million in 2005 and is looking at a range of \$15 million to \$20 million for 2006, said executive vice president and co-founder Martin Rosen.

Health Advocate has 1,300 clients nationwide that range from CBS to Beazer Homes. The company serves 1.3 million employees and their families. These numbers are roughly double the figures last January.

Rosen said his firm helps individuals and HR staff save time and money.

The monetary savings comes from higher productivity at work and, in some cases, finding money employers are paying unnecessarily, Rosen said. Savings generally stems from finding and fixing errors in provider bills, settling balanced-billing issues and correcting inappropriate charges.

**Competition:** There are other companies in the market, including CareCounsel in San Rafael.

An early pioneer in employer-

sponsored health benefits advocacy, Care Counsel was founded in 1997. It serves 25 employers with 75,000 employees, and covers some Sacramento-area residents through contracts with the California State Automobile Association and Cost Plus World Market.

"All of our contracts are with employers directly," said president and CEO Lawrence Gelb.

"We think it's important to play that independent role. We are not part of an insurance company — and not selling a product or service."

**Bulk sales:** Benefit Insurance Services says it got a good deal on the program as a member of United Benefit Advisors. Based in Indianapolis, the employee benefits alliance serves 1,600 professionals in 150 offices nationwide.

The local company pays \$1.25 per employee per month for the ombudsman service, a discount rate for accounts with 1,000 lives or more. The rate generally runs at \$3 or \$3.50 a head.

The benefit alliance has worked with Health Advocate for about 15 months. The take-up by brokers in the organization — and their clients — has been pretty steady, said UBA president Bill Howell. He used the service himself to help his mother-in-law with medication. The benefit extends beyond the employee to parents and in-laws.

"Something like this makes sense," Howell said, "when you consider the amount of information that comes to people in this day and age and the number of decisions an employee is asked to make about their coverage."