

# *First* Award

## *for Innovation in Reducing Health Care Disparities*

*Presented March, 2011*



**National  
Business  
Group on  
Health**



*Awardees, from left to right: Butch Tolbert and Missy McNabb, The Franciscan Clinic; Karen Diproffrio, RN, American Express; Wayne Rawlins, MD, and Michele Toscano, Aetna Inc.; Helen Darling, president and CEO, National Business Group on Health, presenting; Nicole Chaudet, H.J. Heinz Company; Audrietta Izlar, Verizon Communications; and Kristin Kubas, Wyndham Worldwide.*

## Internal Resource Leaders Seen as Key to Efforts

As the nation's workforce grows more diverse, many employers are realizing the importance of addressing disparities in employee benefits and health improvement programs. The goal is to assure that all segments of the employee population have full access to health care services and information that could improve their health and the quality of their care.

To call attention to the urgency of this effort, the National Business Group on Health has given an award, for the first time, to six members for implementing outstanding programs to reduce disparities in health care and health status. The companies are Aetna, American Express, H.J. Heinz Company, St. Francis Medical Center's

Franciscan Clinic, Verizon and Wyndham Worldwide. The “Awards for Innovation in Reducing Health Care Disparities” were presented in March at the National Business Group on Health’s 2011 Business Health Agenda held in Washington, DC.

“We honor these employers because they are visionaries and leaders in recognizing that health and health care disparities are serious problems and they, as employers, have an important role to play in reducing disparities and their effects on their employees and dependents. They have risen to the challenge to remedy health disparities in ways that are unique to the workplace and to their organizations,” said Helen Darling, president and CEO of the National Business Group on Health. “Their aggressive and multifaceted efforts range from creating on-site disparity support leaders and groups to implementing targeted and comprehensive prevention programs, developing sophisticated data systems that track disparities and, finally, to holding health care plans and other vendors accountable while achieving the goal of a workforce that is educated and motivated to improve the quality of its health.”

The gaps in workplace benefits between employee populations exist for a myriad of reasons. They may be the result of language obstacles or different cultural traditions. Socio-economic factors play a role, too, since many families traditionally have not been able to afford full access to health care.

The following are some highlights of the actions taken by the winning companies.

### **Aetna, Inc. Building Trust from the Ground Up**

Aetna was one of the first insurers to request that its members, including its own employees, voluntarily provide their race and ethnicity information. One method that the company used to obtain this data was

gathering input from the company’s employee-managed Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). These groups recommended that Aetna clearly spell out the purpose of the data and the parameters for its application.

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Following through on this suggestion helped establish a basis for trust between employer and employees. To date, Aetna has collected racial and ethnic data for nearly six million active members. The company has made it clear that a person’s racial and ethnic information is critical for the company to be able to implement culturally appropriate care delivery programs. Examples include a Breast Health Ethnic Disparities Initiative, Beginning Right Maternity Program, African American Hypertension Study and, in an effort to shift management of asthma away from the ER to the primary care physician and thus lower costs, a minority-targeted pilot program for managing asthma.

### **American Express. Good Data Brings Good Outcomes**

American Express knew the importance of developing health programs that would zero in on the specific needs of its minority employees. But first it had to pinpoint those needs, and that meant gathering data. Or as one highly respected benefits professional put it, “You can’t manage what you can’t measure.”

Teaming up with the University of Michigan's Health Management Research Center, the company set out to create an "integrated health data warehouse." The first step was motivating employees to complete a health risk appraisal (HRA), which it did by offering to put \$100 in their flexible spending account (FSA) for HRA participation. The team then analyzed the "de-identified data" to determine risk factors for the different ethnic populations such as sedentary lifestyle, smoking and stress. As one American Express official put it, "this information will help us create a roadmap for addressing health disparities and gaps in care" through the company's use of on-site health clinics, its wellness program and partnerships with health plans.

### **H.J. Heinz Company. Pursuing "Wellness for All" in the Workplace**

Since almost one-third of its hourly employees primarily speak Spanish, for the past several years Heinz has created health communications materials in both English and Spanish. There are a smattering of other languages spoken, too, such as Vietnamese and Indian. Heinz tries to address the needs of these employees as much as possible, by having, for example, translators available during open enrollment season.

On-site health champions, called Culture of Health Support Leaders, play an important role in establishing Heinz's bilingual culture at its locations nationwide. Many of these leaders—there are currently 76 of them—are bilingual, which allows them to develop relationships with non-English-speaking employees more easily and encourage participation in wellness activities with a greater degree of effectiveness.

Even before health care reform, Heinz acted to make health prevention a pillar of its workplace programs, casting a wide net in its effort to expand health literacy, improve employee health and lower employer costs. In 2008, the company revamped its medical plan

design. Today, there is 100% coverage of the cost of preventive screenings for employees and their families.

### **The Franciscan Clinic. Making Primary Care Affordable, and the ER Avoidable**

For many Monroe, Louisiana employees of the Baton Rouge-based Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady Health System, health care was often a luxury. Despite the fact that the company has a tiered system of insurance premiums based on hourly wage levels, many employees struggled with making the monthly payments. As a result, when seeking basic health care, they often took the more costly route: a visit to the ER.

But in an effort to correct this disparity, the company created The Franciscan Clinic. Emphasizing preventive care, employee patients pay a modest \$5 copay for each visit (60 minutes for new patients and 30 minutes for established patients). In attending to the whole person, there is a focus on mental health, education and diabetes management. Health professionals also use the patient visit as an opportunity to talk about issues other than the one presented by the patient, allowing time to introduce wellness topics that may have relevance in the patient's life. In this way, too, each patient is treated as a person and not as a chart or a number.

### **Verizon Communications. Building Strategic Partnerships to Address Health Disparities**

The 2002 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, "Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care," found that minorities received lower-quality health services, regardless of such factors as comparable age and income levels with non-minority populations.

In the years since the IOM report came out, Verizon has used targeted questions during its vendor renewal

process to assess whether health plans are addressing disparities. For example, Verizon asks if a health plan's communication materials take into account cultural health concerns, or if its disease management programs contain components that are directed to the specific health needs of minorities.

Verizon created a partnership with WebMD to include race/ethnicity questions in its health risk assessment and health portal registration processes. More than 70% of the WebMD users have self-reported their race/ethnicity. The company believes this large response is due to explaining why the information is needed in assessing health risks.

Verizon also teamed with Aetna to take part in Aetna's Breast Health Education Disparities Initiative. This is aimed at identifying African American and Latina women at Verizon who have not had an annual mammogram. Verizon now has on-site mammography screenings, and recently partnered with Anthem BCBS to contact over 81,000 women reminding them to get a mammogram, emphasizing that disparities exist.

### **Wyndham Worldwide. Balancing Family, Work and Personal Health**

As a hospitality company, Wyndham Worldwide strives through its "Be Well" program for the same high level of wellness for its employees as it tries to achieve for its customers in the area of comfort. Part of that strategic focus is addressing diversity or "reaching organizational objectives by maximizing the contributions of every individual."

Wyndham reaches out in many ways to all segments of its employee population and families, providing preventive care and a raft of wellness services to all employees covered by one of the company medical plans. The company also makes domestic partner benefits available under most of the plans that it offers.

Wyndham formed the Diversity Council in 2007, and it has a full-time wellness advisor who works closely with the Vice President of Diversity. Through its Associate Business Groups, African Americans, Hispanics, veterans and others can express their concerns and suggest company offerings specific to their needs and interests. Wyndham has partnered with the NAACP, the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association and others to spearhead wellness initiatives for its employees. Many of its materials are printed in both Spanish and English, and the company joined with Latina Style Magazine recently in sponsoring the Awards Ceremony and Diversity Leaders Conference for 50 companies that have outstanding records in their outreach to Hispanics.



Summing up, Darling commented: "A common thread in the efforts of these six organizations is the desire to make addressing diversity an integral part of the organizational MO. This is hard work, but done properly and relentlessly it can be transformative. It will mean a wider inclusion of employees who can reap the health benefits that are available to them. And it bodes well, too, for having a more functional and productive workforce."



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