Collaborative Efforts Aid in Reducing Health Disparities

As the U.S. workforce becomes increasingly diverse and company operations globalize, health disparities in the workplace are also becoming more common. Creating successful interventions to reduce health disparities requires going beyond clinical measures; it also requires using strategies that involve many collaborations. Successful strategies include targeted interventions that educate employees, decrease barriers to access, and provide culturally relevant and linguistically accurate communications and programs.

The National Business Group on Health presented the second annual Innovation in Reducing Health Care Disparities Award to two member companies, Cigna and Pitney Bowes, Inc. in partnership with UnitedHealthcare, for developing strategic plans to reduce disparities in the workplace. The awards were presented at the March 2012 Business Health Agenda conference held in Washington, DC.

“We applaud Cigna and Pitney Bowes, Inc. and its partner UnitedHealthcare, for their commitment and ongoing efforts to address and reduce health disparities. They are among a select, visionary group of forward-thinking organizations that recognize that reducing health disparities in the workplace will lead to improved health, productivity and quality of life of their employees and dependents,” said Helen Darling, president and CEO of the National Business Group on Health.

These companies recognize that health disparities exist and that disparities have an impact not only on employees and their families, but on the company as well. Moreover, reducing health care disparities offers employers quantifiable ways to lower medical plan spend and improve worker productivity.

Following is a summary of the interventions taken by the winning companies.
Cigna. Delivering Culturally Competent Care and Tailored Interventions

In 2008, Cigna launched the Health Disparities Council, an employee-driven initiative to promote equitable health care. Since then, the council has worked to leverage the ingenuity and diversity of its own employees to design innovative strategies that deliver culturally competent care and tailored interventions that improve the health of its employees and customers.

The council’s strategic plan focuses on the following areas:

**Leveraging Diversity Data:** Cigna uses a system that effectively approximates race and ethnicity data in geographic areas to identify and prioritize targeted health care programs for specific populations. This system was recently expanded to include urban status, educational level and income disparities data.

**Promoting Health Care Interventions:** Cigna tailors its programs to study whether financial incentives and educational materials are effective in motivating individuals with specific health conditions to seek health care.

**Improving Customer Communications:** Cigna uses the cultural expertise of its employees with Employee Resource Groups (African-American, Spanish and Chinese) to design customer communications that are customized to specific populations in terms of language, cultural appropriateness, reading level and preferred channel. Cigna’s goal is to make all customer interactions simple and user-friendly.

**Engaging Employees:** Since 2010 more than 20,000 Cigna employees have participated in cultural competency training. The program is now required for all new employees and ongoing training is provided for customer-facing employees. Cigna also launched Colleague Resource Groups for its employees to create, support and empower diverse populations within the organization and the community.

**Building Relationships with Health Care Professionals and Employers:** Cigna is engaging health care professionals through a website portal that provides training, tools and resources for physicians and their staff to recognize and manage issues related to cultural competency and health disparities. Cigna worked with the American Cancer Society to address a disparity in cancer screening.

Cigna also created a Health Disparities Client Advisory Council to work collaboratively with several employers and their diverse employee populations to address health disparities.

Cigna remains committed to improving health equity by delivering interventions and communications that are customer-centric and culturally appropriate. Cigna’s success in applying innovative solutions to reducing health disparities demonstrates its commitment to improving health equity—not just for its own employees—but also for its 11 million customers.
Pitney Bowes, Inc./UnitedHealthcare.  
**Using Partnerships to Improve Health Status and Engage Employees**

With Pitney Bowes’ highly diverse employee population representing various ethnic backgrounds and cultures, including 15% Hispanic/Latino ancestry, Pitney Bowes recognized the many health care challenges and wanted to address these concerns quickly. In 2010, Pitney Bowes partnered with UnitedHealthcare to improve the health status of its employees, and in particular, engage its Spanish-preference employees.

UnitedHealthcare reached out to Latino Health Solutions (LHS), a dedicated team of Hispanic professionals focused on improving the health and well-being of its Hispanic/Latino members.

Together Pitney Bowes and UnitedHealthcare developed a strategy to improve communication and enhance engagement of Pitney Bowes’ Hispanic/Latino employee population.

**Understanding Population Needs:** Focus groups were conducted by marketing consultants to determine the needs and preferences of Spanish-preference employees. Focus groups addressed the importance of health insurance, English-only materials, consumer-directed health plans, nurseries, and the patient-physician relationship.

**Developing Customized Resources:** UnitedHealthcare seamlessly integrated LHS’ 60 bilingual customer care professionals into the suite of services available to Pitney Bowes employees. LHS provided targeted bilingual communications, developed dedicated bilingual health and wellness websites, health information kiosks and offered cultural competency training. Using personalized messages that were based on Pitney Bowes employees’ personal preferences, Pitney Bowes was further able to engage its employees.

**Using Data to Measure Impact:** In the first 10 months of operation, LHS’ call center staff fielded more than 1,000 calls to help explain benefits and connect members to Spanish-speaking providers. By providing Spanish-speaking enrollments at its health fairs/enrollment meetings, Pitney Bowes increased enrollment in health benefit programs and engagement in health care education.

**Integrating Efforts with Other Client Programs:** The LHS team is now an integral part of the Pitney Bowes/UnitedHealthcare team. With the success of this program, Pitney Bowes plans to launch a similar comprehensive program for its Asian-American population.

“Many employers go to great lengths to attract a diverse workforce,” Darling said. “But they may not realize that these populations have diverse health needs and may experience different treatments when they seek health care. The leadership teams at Cigna and Pitney Bowes, Inc. and UnitedHealthcare understand the importance of reducing health disparities. We hope that other organizations will follow their lead in their efforts to take on this ever-increasing challenge.”