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## Share and share alike: Employer coalitions unite for health series

By Kathleen Koster

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Modeled from the Kansas City Collaborative (KC2), the National Business Coalition on Health's American Health Strategy Project has selected five employer coalitions across the country to extend the program to additional communities to help employers improve the health of their employees and families, manage health care costs, and promote wellness and prevention.

"Even though we all compete for talent in our industries and our areas, I don't feel any competition in that room," says Melissa Campbell, benefits manager with American Century, a KC2 participating employer. "A lot of HR departments have slimmed down, so this is a place you can go and have conversations with others who are doing the same type of work that you are and share openly."

The KC2 grouped 16 employers and worked with Pfizer Inc. for financial and technical resources. The three-year project used the employers as a laboratory to understand how to better engage employers around plan design and employee wellness, and to help employers better understand and address risk.

"One advantage of doing such a deep dive with the 16 employers that participated in the Kansas City Collaborative is that it gave us, the coalition, the road map of what our employers need as solutions to address their population's health," says Sara Palermo, vice president of Mid-America Coalition on Health Care.

Now, NBCH and Pfizer Inc. hope to create detailed triptychs, based on the KC2 model, with an Early Adopters series. The Early Adopters initiative will begin between now and early November in five of Pfizer's regions.

The participating coalitions are the **Dallas-Fort Worth Business Group on Health**, Midwest Business Group on Health, Oregon Coalition of Health Care Purchasers, the Pittsburgh Business Group on Health and the Virginia Business Coalition on Health. Pfizer will provide technical, financial and personnel support.

"We always knew from the beginning that it was our aim to make this replicable in other communities. We are unique among employer-driven coalitions around the country in that we are collaborative: We have everyone at the table," says Bill Bruning, president and CEO, Mid-America Coalition on Health Care.

### Sharing the knowledge wealth

The aim of the overarching American Health Strategy Project is to bring together diverse groups of employers and vendors to share and implement best practices and innovative ideas, which will later be rolled out to NBCH's employer coalitions at large.

"They can accomplish more together than alone, so it's really important that employers understand that learning from their peers can be really valuable. Partnering with other organizations in the community, whether it's their vendors, public health, the business coalition, pharmaceutical companies, the chamber - there's a lot of other resources out there, and employers have a lot of opportunity to learn what works instead of reinventing the wheel," explains Palermo.

One challenge employers faced was employee engagement. In terms of effective messaging, peer-to-peer sharing among the employers yielded good results.

"One of the largest employers in the group was actually learning from one of the least sophisticated of the employers, but one who developed some very effective means of engaging employees, and communicating and messaging around benefits. There's clearly a lot to be learned among the employers, and that is the KC2 model," says Bruning.

From Campbell's perspective, this meeting of the minds was instrumental in learning more about how to present and design benefits.

"I went into the group thinking it was going to be educational sessions, but it really was much more than that. It was truly a collaboration of idea sharing and working sessions, along with educational sessions by top researchers. That's what really surprised me - how involved you can be [working in a group like this] and how much input you can have, as opposed to just being a listening participant in a lecture," Campbell explains of her experience with KC2.

Key sources of information for population assessment for the coalitions include data from pharmacy and medical claims, health and wellness programming, and disability and workers' compensation.

"The challenge is to align all of those areas - often with different managers - and to make sure that the consumer has a consistent set of aligned incentives and messages relating to their role in staying healthy," says Dennis White, senior vice president for value-based purchasing, National Business Coalition on Health.

#### **Bridging data silos**

One of the participating coalitions in the second phase of the American Health Strategy Project most likely will begin its portion of the Early Adopters program this summer with up to 10 members, mostly self-insured companies - such as Archon Group, Brinker International, City of Mesquite, Energy Future Holdings, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, Interstate Batteries and Vought Aircraft - who have access to their own data.

"Not only do we get that technical expertise [from Pfizer and NBCH] on collecting and integrating lots of different sources of data and coming up with an optimal plan design for each employer, but the employers and benefits managers of these companies get to meet with each other and learn from each other," emphasizes Marianne Fazen, executive director, Dallas-Fort Worth Business Group on Health.

"For many benefits managers, everything is in separate silos, they haven't engaged with plans to help them be better at analyzing the data they have from disease management and so on and coming up with a better plan design," says Fazen.

Indeed, at the Mid-America Coalition on Health Care, the primary challenge for most employers involved data silos.

Sometimes, employers had too much data and needed help sifting through it. Other times, they needed help gaining access to disparate siloed sources of data they needed to make strategic decisions.

It was six months before the group had its collective arms around the issue - data collection, interpretation and worksite interventions.

Campbell says that the coalition formed for the KC2 project brings all data and trends together, and you can see trends across the plans. "It was a great tool to get people to stop and pull all of those pieces together to see the bigger picture, rather than segmenting those different vendors and benefits," she says.

As a result, she's learned to push back on vendors to give her information that she can cull into one central repository and provide more detailed data in the same format in the same terminology.

The American Health Strategy Project will continue its ongoing work with KC2, start new work with the Early Adopters across the country, and in November, NBCH will talk with their members about the progress that has been made. In the first quarter of 2011, the tools from the American Health Strategy Project will be available to all NBCH members.

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