

Washington state health insurers get an exam

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Alliance report wants to help employers do comparison shopping

Port Blakely Companies wants more information about health insurance companies than it can glean from their sales materials, and the Seattle timber business is about to get its wish — or at least a first crack at it. The **Puget Sound Health Alliance** on Oct. 23 released its first “**Community Checkup**” report comparing how well six local health insurers are serving business and government customers.

The Alliance acknowledges, though, that its first public report on insurers is imperfect, and one insurer, **Premera Blue Cross**, says the report is not an accurate measure of its performance. The report is an attempt to give buyers comparative performance information about insurers at a time when various critics in the current national debate over health insurance reform are vilifying the industry as greedy and dishonest.

The Alliance says the report responds to employers wanting evidence that health insurers are following national standards on improving customer health, promoting safe and effective health care, and reducing waste and costs. Mary McWilliams, executive director of the Puget Sound Health Alliance, said health insurers have many programs and products directly influencing decisions by patients, doctors and hospitals.

“Until now,” she said, “what has been missing is a consistent way for the community to see the degree to which health-plan programs follow national standards based on evidence and how health plans compare in this region and with others across the country.”

McWilliams acknowledged that the first checkup report is not perfect, but said “it’s an important first step.” Public reporting, she said, will spur insurers to make improvements. The Puget Sound Health Alliance is a nonprofit Seattle organization comprising some 150 businesses and public-sector members.

Port Blakely Companies joined **Alaska Air Group**, **The Boeing Co.**, Puget Sound Energy and Recreational Equipment Inc. in sponsoring the checkup report, as did four local governments and one state agency.

Except for those who work closely with brokers or consultants with inside knowledge about the insurance industry, many mid-sized or small employers must rely on insurer sales and marketing materials, said Lindsay Geyer, human resources vice president at Port Blakely Companies. “With this Community Checkup report on health plans,” she said, “we are building the ability for everyone to make apples-to-apples comparisons of health plans in this market based on national standards and shared priorities.”

Among other things, the report seeks to score insurers on their use of consumer-satisfaction surveys, and on how well they support doctors and hospitals on improving patient care. The report also scores insurers on how well they do with programs assisting customers with prescription drugs, health promotion, disease prevention, chronic-disease management, drug abuse and mental health.

One health insurer is unhappy with the report. Premera Blue Cross, which scored last on all measures, claims the information tool the Alliance used to measure insurers does not accurately assess its performance. The tool, called eValue8, was developed by the National Business Coalition on Health.

“The eValue8 report falls short of reflecting actual differences in health-plan performance in this region,” said Scott Forslund, Premera’s communications director. “We strongly support performance reporting, but we’re concerned that this report is not ready for prime time,” he said. “To its credit,” he added, “the Alliance has been very up-front by acknowledging that fact in disclaimers accompanying the report.”

To prepare the report, the Alliance asked health insurers for responses to a standardized survey. Some scores, though, reflect the absence of standardized information from the insurers, the Alliance admits. The report uses national standards to assess six health insurers active in this market: Regence BlueShield, Premera Blue Cross, Group Health Cooperative, Aetna, **Cigna** and United Healthcare.

National insurers Aetna, Cigna and United generally scored higher than locally-based carriers Regence and Premera. Group Health, an HMO, is in a category by itself and is measured against several national standards.