

POST GUILD forum



Local 32035 The Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild

September 1, 2004

Vacation Donations Urgently Needed!

Gwen Frances, a Guild member in accounting, recently suffered a stroke. Currently, she is unable to return to work and has used up all of her sick leave. She must wait another five months before she becomes eligible for long-term disability. If you have any "Excess" vacation, you may donate up to 50% of it to Gwen Frances, or other employees with serious health conditions. Please call Debbie Booth at 334-6450 to arrange your donation.

Weigh In On Disease Management

Washington Post management is in the process of rolling out a new voluntary disease management program aimed at reducing overall health costs by helping employees better control a range of illnesses. Peggy Schiff, Post Vice President and Controller, sent an email dated Aug. 26 with the subject line "Matter of Fact" that offers the company's overview of the program.

The Guild has been trying to get the Post to institute such a program for more than a year, noting that one of the best ways we can keep health insurance expenses down for all of us is for the company to offer incentives for people with chronic diseases to manage those diseases better. After the two most recent meetings with management, and the Post's decision to implement such a plan, Guild representatives proposed issuing a joint memo to show we are working on this effort together. But management rejected that idea, so we are taking this opportunity to fill in a few of the gaps and provide you with an update on our broader efforts to secure the best health insurance coverage at the most affordable price.

As many of you know, disease management has been a hot trend in health policy for several years. Many companies are having great success in improving people's health and reducing costs through these innovative programs. So far, scientific data suggests patients with chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, asthma, high blood pressure and some cancers benefit the most from programs tailored to help people manage those diseases through proper diet, exercise, testing, medication, etc.

We want to stress this is entirely CONFIDENTIAL and VOLUNTARY. None of your personal medical information will be shared with management or anyone else. Soon, you'll receive a packet in the mail summarizing what sort of assistance will be offered and the modest—yes, very modest—financial incentives for participating. Later, if you suffer from one of the covered chronic conditions, you will receive a phone call asking if you are interested. If you are not, simply say no thank you and that will be it.

Pointing to successful disease management programs run by the City of Asheville, NC and Pitney Bowes, Guild representatives pressed hard for the Post to provide more generous incentives. Employers that have waived prescription co-payments or other minor, but frequent, charges (such as for diabetes test strips) have shown the best results. But the Post decided to stick with its plan of cash rewards of up to \$50 for workers who complete the program. We will continue to lobby for better incentives because under the current plan we are not convinced employees will really save money. But in the meantime we want to endorse the general approach and encourage everyone to take advantage of it. Success in the program should mean not only better health but eventually reduced costs for the company and employees.

If you have any questions or suggestions, please feel free to speak with Guild representatives or management.

We are fast approaching the next insurance open enrollment period. Schiff's Aug. 26 memo warned of "an increase of about 16 percent in 2005." Yet in a meeting that very day, Ann McDaniel, Corporate Vice President of Human Resources, explicitly told Guild representatives that although claims had risen 16 percent over the past 12 months, she did not anticipate an actual price hike of that degree. Indeed, a 16 percent increase would run counter to all national trends that indicate the rates of cost increase have actually slowed over the past year. The company has promised to provide us with data showing what illnesses are costing the company the most money. Realistically, any premium increase should be in the single digits and we will continue to fight for reasonable costs.

POST GUILD UNIT

You will hear from management that Aetna PPO premiums for the Post were flat in 2004, but keep in mind that the Post shifted a larger percentage of those costs to employees. As a result, most employees saw increases last year, in some cases whopping ones. The Post has also refused to spread the increases more equitably, as the Guild proposed last fall. In our view, the highest paid employees should pay a larger share of health costs. We are again asking management to devise a fairer way of distributing these costs.

In two recent meetings with management, the Guild has called for greater emphasis on prevention and wellness. Post management says it agrees, although it has been a terribly slow process with the phrases “too expensive” and “not possible” uttered most frequently. The company has dragged its feet on posting calorie information in the cafeteria, setting up an onsite gymnasium or adopting many of the other strategies major companies are using to keep their workers healthy and happy. (One small example that has worked in other companies: installing carpeting, decent lighting and even music and art in stairwells to get more people walking.)

The Post has so far refused to raise the coverage limits for preventive services, which have been proven to save money in the long run. A year ago, we were told the Post intended to sponsor a health fair, which has yet to happen. In response to our request to sell half portions in the cafeteria at reduced price, Peggy Schiff instructed the cafeteria to simply cut the portions—but keep the same prices. Management rejected our request to arrange a group discount at a local gymnasium, citing liability concerns.

We cannot help but observe there is a certain irony in hearing management complain that the newspaper staff consumes more health care services at higher cost than other Post companies, yet there has been minimal effort to truly get at the root of these costs. Truly innovative companies are not satisfied to shrug their shoulders and say, “Too bad, costs are rising.” We need to find out why our workers need so much medical care and what can be done to help them.

Far too often, we hear from management that Post employees are not interested in these things or would not avail themselves of wellness programs. It is important that Peggy Schiff and Ann McDaniel hear from you about what you want and how our health insurance is working. Would you work out in a Post gym? Do you want to know how many calories are in that burger? Would you test your blood glucose more regularly if the test strips were free?

It is in everyone’s interest to find ways to control rising health costs. As a sign of good faith, the Guild has worked hard to present management with recommendations and data. Now you need to weigh in.

- Ceci Connolly, Guild Health Benefits Committee Member
- Rick Weiss, Guild Health Benefits Committee Member
- Rick Ehrmann, Guild Health Benefits Committee Member