

Engineered for Health

Onsite clinics create a healthier workplace.

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As the cost of health care continues to rise, employers and employees alike are finding onsite health clinics a compelling option.

At first sight, the 3,300-square-foot medical clinic on Hopkins Court in Pullman looks like any other healthcare office. The neat, welcoming reception space adjoins seven clinician rooms, two offices, and a nurses' station. The three-year-old clinic houses one physician, three nurse practitioners, two registered nurses, and support staff.

Notably missing from the scene, however, is the cavernous waiting room that's a staple in most medical offices. There's a good reason for this: Patients rarely need to wait. That's because the clinic is operated by Pullman-based Schweitzer Engineering Laboratories (SEL), a 31-year-old employee-owned company that designs and manufactures parts to protect power grids, for the care of its employees and their families.

"The clinic provides the kind of care patients dream of, with short wait times, same-day

appointments, no co-pay or charge for services, and you don't feel rushed with the provider," says Michele Beehler, SEL human resources manager.

ONSITE, ON TREND

Schweitzer isn't alone in its effort to reengineer employee healthcare; the firm's onsite clinic is part of a trend toward employer-managed healthcare that shows no signs of slowing.

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— RYAN SCHMID, CEO, VERA WHOLE HEALTH

AT A GLANCE

Onsite health clinics are expected to grow 15-20 percent per year.

Schweitzer Engineering Laboratories (SEL) reported a 25 percent savings in the first year after it transitioned to a self-funded health plan and opened a clinic at its Pullman campus.

SEL's clinic is on track to save the company \$1 million this year.



According to health information technology company Cerner, onsite health clinics are expected to grow at 15 to 20 percent per year, and benefits consultant Mercer reports that 30 percent of companies with more than 5,000 employees offer some type of onsite or near-site primary care.

Many companies don't stop at one clinic: Cerner reports that 40 percent of employers who offer onsite clinics have two to five. Schweitzer opened a second onsite clinic in Lewiston, Idaho, about 30 minutes from Pullman, this March.

Onsite clinics deliver significant results, from cost savings to employee satisfaction to all-around better health outcomes for workers, says Ryan Schmid, CEO of Vera Whole Health, a Seattle-based company that establishes and operates onsite clinics across diverse industries. Recent Vera success stories include thriving onsite clinics at Seattle Children's Hospital and the City of Kirkland.

Vera reports that onsite clinics generate a 10-25 percent net cost savings for self-funded employers and a 100-268 percent return on investment (ROI). According to Cerner, onsite clinics offer ROI as high as \$6 for every dollar spent.

After SEL transitioned to a self-funded health plan in 2012, management realized that onsite primary care could deliver more efficient, effective healthcare. In its first year, the onsite clinic generated a 25 percent cost savings.

SEL's clinic, which serves its 2,200 Pullman-based employees and their families, is on track to save the company \$1 million this year, which includes \$142,700 in employee hours and \$150,230 in employee co-pays.

Employee satisfaction got a boost, too, says Beehler. "The clinic has generated the most positive employee feedback of any other benefit we've offered."

Employees who use the clinics aren't the only ones happy with the model: healthcare providers benefit too. Even in a competitive hiring market facing a shortage of primary care doctors, onsite clinics have no problem finding physicians to employ, says Schmid. "We have a long list of physicians eager to step into this model. Providers love spending more time with each patient. It speaks to why many of them went into primary care in the first place."

The doctors and nurses employed at the clinics can spend more time with each patient and avoid the insurance headaches, burgeoning patient loads, and rushed pace that characterize modern primary care, he said.

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Recent research shows that modern primary care doctors in traditional clinics juggle about 2,300 patients each, spending just 15 minutes per office visit. Harried

providers don't have time to answer questions or explain their recommendations, so fewer patients get needed follow-up care. In traditional primary care settings, just 55 percent of patients get recommended chronic or preventative care, and up to 80 percent have an uncontrolled chronic health condition like high cholesterol or high blood pressure.

When providers have ample time with each patient, preventative care rates go up, and cost for emergency care services goes down, driving down overall health costs. On average, Beehler says, Schweitzer's health care providers spend around 30 minutes per visit, and each provider's patient load is significantly smaller than that of a typical primary care doctor.

MODEL PATIENTS

The health care providers at Schweitzer's onsite clinics are Schweitzer employee-owners, just like the patients they treat. By contrast, Vera operates the clinics it establishes for clients; the health care providers staffing the clinics are Vera employees.

Either model can work well, Schmid notes, but adding a layer of organizational separation between the onsite medical staff and their patients can offer some peace of mind for employees concerned about privacy.

"The security and privacy of health care is the top question we're asked by employees when we establish a new onsite clinic," says Schmid — though, he notes, employee health information is safeguarded by HIPPA laws in both management models.

At SEL, bringing onsite medical staff fully into the fold of employee ownership was the way to go, says Beehler. When health care providers are fully invested in the success of both their organization and their patients, health care is about more than short-term results. It's about long-term wellness. [WB](#)

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