

UPMC Health Plan part of pilot program to improve foster kids' care

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by Kris B. Mamula

UPMC Health Plan will try to improve the continuity of health care for Allegheny County's foster child population as part of a two-year pilot program.

Some 2,000 children go through foster care in a given year in the county, and the mobility of the population contributes to a disproportionate share of physical and emotional problems, according to John Lovelace, vice president of medical assistance programs at UPMC. The average child is in foster care for two years, and they are disproportionately poor, he said.

"The leap is we're trying to be more than just an insurance company," Lovelace said. "We're trying to be stewards of public health."

The insurer's Medicaid product, UPMC for You, was among 11 managed care organizations nationwide to be chosen for the project by the Center for **Health Care Strategies Inc.**, a Hamilton, N.J.-based advocacy group, which put up \$15,000 for the project. The pilot will explore new approaches to meeting the health and behavioral care needs of children who are eligible for Medicaid, with an emphasis on access and continuity of care.

UPMC for You will partner with **University of Pittsburgh Medical Center** affiliate Community Care Behavioral Health as well as the Allegheny County Office of Children, Youth & Families in coordinating care for children in foster care. The pilot begins this month.

UPMC's role will begin with identification of the child's health care benefits followed by a behavioral assessment, Lovelace said. An electronic medical record will be developed, which will follow the child through placement and evaluation, and children will be

quickly assigned new primary care physicians to make sure they receive care for chronic medical problems.

"We're excited about this," Lovelace said.

Marc Cherna, director of the county's Department of Human Services, which oversees the contract, was unavailable for comment.

When not controlled, asthma is the kind of childhood problem that can result in frequent emergency room visits and hospitalizations, said Megan McAndrew, senior communications officer at the Center for Health Care Strategies. Frequent hospital visits drive up the cost of health care.

"You want to avoid emergency room visits before they're costly, but you also worry about them because they're a quality of life issue," McAndrew said. "It's a coup for UPMC to have received the grant. We consider them an outstanding performer in the market."

Number of hospitalizations, before and after intervention, will be one measure of the program's success, she said. Improving the consistency of primary care for foster children will be key.

"It's a substantial problem in the Medicaid population as a whole," McAndrew said.

"People are eligible for a while, then they become ineligible.

"The problem is you lose continuity of care."

Continuity of care in the foster child population is huge, according to Liz Meitner, vice president of government affairs and policy at Voices for America's Children, a Washington D.C. advocacy group. Some 500,000 children are in foster care nationwide, she said.

"Children in foster care have significant health and mental health issues," Meitner said.

"It's nearly impossible to have continuity of care if you're in foster care and moving around."