

The Tribune-Democrat

Cambria strikes deal for health coverage

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The Tribune-Democrat

Published: December 07, 2007 11:52 pm

EBENSBURG — A little competition on employees' health insurance turned out to be healthy from a financial standpoint for Cambria County, its workers and retirees.

And the coverage will be the same, or in some instances, better than the current plan, county officials said Friday.

It's tailored to meet the county's requirements, said Ron Baker, human resources director.

"We have a Cambria County plan that UPMC insures," he said.

President Commissioner P.J. Stevens added, "This is not a cookie-cutter plan of UPMC.

Unless you create meaningful competition, you get what the carrier gives."

The county, which has had coverage for years under Highmark's Blue Cross/Blue Shield, has switched to UPMC Health Plan with a relatively low premium increase of 5 percent for 2008, the commissioners said.

Some years the percentage increase has reached into the double digits, Chief Clerk Mike Gelles said. The 2007 rise was 7.9 percent, he said.

The cost to the county will be about \$13 million for the 1,500 employees and 550 retirees, Baker said.

The savings by switching to UPMC is about \$600,000, Stevens said.

The switch in carriers was approved Friday by the commissioners. The approval came after questions were raised by approximately 25 members of the Cambria County Retired Employees Association about not being included on the committee studying the issue.

"We understand you as commissioners want to save the taxpayers money, and you have the right to change our health care plan. But we are taxpayers also. We felt we should have had some input," said Judy Hambright, association spokeswoman.

The study committee, which began work in February 2006, included rank-and-file members of the various unions representing employees, Baker and other county human resources employees. No elected official was included in an attempt to keep the talks “neutral,” Stevens said.

The contract with UPMC is for one year only.

During that year, doctors not in the UPMC plan who are providing care for employees and retirees will be able to get into the UPMC plan, officials said.