



## More A.C. Care

*By Harold Brubaker*

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The union that represents casino workers in Atlantic City has for years been experimenting with ways to reduce health-care costs for its members while improving results.

The latest effort is a primary-care center opened this year in Atlantic City by Unite Here Health, a national labor-management trust fund that provides health benefits to 20,000 Unite Here Local 54 members and dependents.

The center, which had its grand opening Tuesday, has three physicians and a nurse-practitioner. It also has a pharmacy, laboratory services, and a center for physical therapy.

Unite Here Local 54 members do not have to use the center, but among the incentives is the absence of co-pays, an official said.

The goal is for participants to have one-stop shopping here and to also be able to connect the dots between those services, so that they are not happening in silos," said Elizabeth Gilbertson, chief of strategy for Unite Here Health, which is based in Aurora, Ill., and covers 200,000 nationally.

The primary-care center in Atlantic City, where the union's trust fund spends \$100 million a year, is Unite Here Health's first, though more are planned in Las Vegas, union officials said.

There's a reason Atlantic City was first.

"The trajectory for the total cost of care here has been more extreme in recent years than in any other part of our national trust fund's experience," Gilbertson said of the Atlantic City region.

AtlantiCare, a nonprofit health system with hospitals in Atlantic City and Galloway Township in Atlantic County, has a 64 percent market share, according to a Fitch Ratings report last year.

That dominance has the union and employers looking for alternatives.

"Because AtlantiCare is preoccupied with dictating everything about health care and really doesn't want to work with large groups like ourselves, we came to the conclusion several years ago that we have to start taking control of it ourselves," said Bob McDevitt, president of Local 54.

McDevitt said AtlantiCare accounted for about 58 percent of hospital stays by union members or their dependents and that the system had raised prices year after year while the casino industry that employed his members was in steep decline.

"The time came for us to get control of quality and spend our money efficiently," McDevitt said.

An AtlantiCare executive, Steven Blumberg, called the new center - a block from the AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center - "a welcome addition to the community."

"We are always in need of more primary care," said Blumberg, who attended the grand opening.

Since 2007, the union health fund and AtlantiCare have been partners in a "special care center [that] was conceived to deliver intensive outpatient care to patients with complex chronic illnesses," Gilbertson said.

More recently, the health fund, Caesars Entertainment Corp., and the Borgata have been collaborating on ways to save money. Among the possibilities is a "a narrow network, the composition of which we're still exploring," Gilbertson said.

Unite Here Health hired Continuum Health Alliance of Marlton to manage the center. Continuum has more than 1,000 providers in its network.

Continuum is in the background and manages all the services to enable that center to be effective and efficient, short of providing the actual care coordination, said Christopher T. Olivia, Continuum's president.

"The union has its own care coordinators down there on site. What we can do is support them with technology and information on the performance of the center," Olivia said.

