

State to address worker health woes

■ Program coming to combat chronic illnesses, rising costs

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State health officials say chronic diseases are killing workers. And, they say, health insurance costs are killing employers.

In August, the state will sponsor a program in Liberty County that address both concerns.

Business leaders take note: Registration is free. All it costs is a day of your time. And Coastal Health District manager Mildred Pierce claims she's going to make it well worth your while.

The workshop, designed for CEOs, human resource managers, and owners of small businesses, will explain why health insurance costs are rising and how employers can provide comprehensive but cost effective benefits plans for employees.

The United States is really in a unique situation in the world. Depending on the study, the U.S. ranks 17th to 23rd in the world in health outcomes, by rank. That means that there are 16 other nations that have better health outcomes than U.S. That raises several serious issues, according to Pierce.

"The primary thing is, in the U.S., our primary cause of death is our choices," she said. "We're making very unhealthy choic-

es. The reason we are talking with employers about this is employers are becoming the number one providers of health care in the nation, by virtue of the fact they are negotiating insurance contracts for their employees.

"They're actually the ones controlling what kind of health care people are getting in this country, because lets face it, people get what they afford, and health care is expensive," Pierce said.

She said the workshop is designed to help explain how employers can chose the most cost effective plan for their business, which she said is not necessarily synonymous with cheapest.

She said trainers will show employers how to evaluate their workforce and factor in costs like lost manhours and higher medical bills for employees with serious illnesses versus the savings of plans that provide fewer preventative services.

The program is also aimed at employers who don't provide health care plans, she said.

"Their employees are not accessing health care, and when all of the sudden someone has developed a health problem, now they are unable to work but they have a certain level of skill and performance that their employer is dependent on," she said.

"It's not rocket science, but it does surprise people when they do the math... there are very few employers that have the background to make good decisions about what kind of health care their people need to reduce the incidence of and prevent chronic diseases.

"Businesses are all different and have different kinds of workforces and so on, and different kinds of resources available. We want to provide them with tools for education to determine what's best for their workforce," Pierce said.

According to Pierce, heart disease is the biggest killer in every county in the state. And chronic diseases, which include heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, osteoporosis and arthritis, account for 60 percent of health care costs nationwide, but 75 percent in Georgia.

Attacking the three biggest risk factors for those disease s— smoking, poor diet and lack of exercise — is another way to reduce health care costs, Pierce said.

She said the workshop's ideas will help employers as much as their employees.

"They know health care costs are climbing, and they feel victimized by it, but they don't know what they can do. We are going to give them the tools so they don't have to be victims anymore," she said.