

# Program to help businesses with health care costs

By: Charles Oliver

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Peter Townsley helps businesses cut their health insurance costs.

"The costs of providing health coverage continue to rise, and many businesses are asking themselves if they can continue to afford those increases," Townsley says.

Many firms have cut health benefits. Others have shifted jobs to other countries.

But Townsley, a principal in Atlanta-based Health Navigators and executive director of the Center for Preventive Medicine in Atlanta, says there's another alternative. "Prevention is the answer," he said.

Townsley will be just one of the speakers Wednesday at the Healthy Solutions conference (8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) at the Northwest Georgia Trade and Convention Center.

is designed to help businesses find ways to control health care costs. It is sponsored by several groups, including the North Georgia Health District and the Northwest Georgia Healthcare Partnership, and is funded by the federal Centers for Disease Control.

Robbie Burlas, another principal at Health Navigators, says data from Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Georgia show 70 percent of that company's claims costs are



generated by just 8 percent of those covered by policies.

"If we can cut that 8 percent down to just 7 percent, we can cut costs by 10 percent," Burlas said.

He and Townsley say the first step in cutting health care costs is to identify that 8 percent of employees.

"In a nutshell, companies have to identify those with high risk factors for cardiovascular disease," Townsley said.

That means testing for blood pressure, high cholesterol and triglycerides and high blood sugar.

After that, companies must set up programs to help employees reduce those risk factors.

"No one wants to be the health police, and that's not what we are talking about. We are talking about giving employees a way to take themselves out of harm's way," Townsley said.

The exact steps will differ by company. For some, it may mean providing employees with time on the job to exercise. For others, it may mean providing on-site nutrition classes.

"We advise them to build health into their business and approach this as they would any other part of their business. That means setting a budget, collecting information, monitoring their programs and continuing to look for ways to improve them," he said.

Townsley says Fieldale Farms, a

Baldwin, Ga.-based poultry company, has been able to cut the rate of growth for its health care costs to just 2.5 percent on average over the past 12 years. That compares to a national rate of growth of 12 percent, and a 17.8 percent rate of growth in Georgia.

Officials from Fieldale Farms will be at the conference Wednesday to talk about how they cut costs.

Nancy Kennedy, executive director of the Northwest Georgia Healthcare Partnership, says about 80 executives from firms employing around 40,000 people locally have already signed up for the conference. But about 10-15 seats still remain.