

# PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL

Volume 25, Number 19

JUNE 30 - JULY 6, 2006

## Healthcare advocate finds benefits savings for city police

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FLOURTOWN — A pilot program launched last year between the Philadelphia Police Department's benefits management administrator and a Montgomery County healthcare advocacy firm generated an estimated \$1.6 million in savings.



**Long**

Based on those results, the benefits administrator, Law Enforcement Health Benefits (LEHB), will sign a new one-year contract with Guardian Nurses Healthcare Advocates Inc. to continue the relationship.

Guardian Nurses was hired by LEHB to review case histories of "high-cost" claimants, defined as those with claims of more than \$50,000 a year. The company was also given the job of helping police officers and their families navigate the complex world of healthcare providers and insurers to ensure patients were getting the appropriate care.

"They were looking out of the box for a solution to provide better care for its members and to help contain costs," said Betty Long, founder and president of Guardian Nurses.

Long said her 3-year-old Flourtown firm, which employs five full-time and 15 part-time nurses to serve as patient advocates, was able to uncover payments for duplicate services,

unnecessary drug therapies and issues with patient noncompliance.

"A lot of times, patients didn't know where to get help outside their own communities and they didn't want to get involved in getting a second opinion," she said. "With our help, the process didn't feel so overwhelming."

Long said that in at least five cases their intervention avoided costly and unnecessary hospital admissions. Examples included discovering a misdiagnosis prior to a scheduled surgery, getting a non-surgical treatment for a patient with a brain tumor and helping another patient avoid a mastectomy.

By the end of the pilot program, Guardian Nurses provided advocacy services for 364 police officers and their family members.

Guardian Nurses competes in a small niche of the multibillion-dollar healthcare industry. Other local advocacy firms include Health Advocate, a Plymouth Meeting firm launched in 2001 by a group of former U.S. Healthcare executives; and Healthcare Advocates, a Center City firm led by Kevin Flynn. Flynn first conceived of the idea for his company after the difficulties he encountered after being injured when he was hit by a car while in college.

Natalie Coleman, Guardian Nurses' vice president of operations, said while other advocacy firms do most of their work by telephone, Guardian Nurses will accompany patients to hospitals and physicians' offices — settings where patients are sometimes reluctant to voice questions and concerns.

Coleman said the \$1.6 million cost savings

estimate the company generated for LEHB was derived from more than \$750,000 the company saved by preventing unnecessary medical procedures from being performed. The remainder represents the reduction in expenses, linked to "high-cost" claimants, which dropped by 5.8 percent last year after increasing by at least 10 percent in each of the previous four years.

"The results have been outstanding," Thomas J. Lamb, administrator for LEHB, said. "[Hiring] Guardian Nurses has led to an immediate return on investment."

Lamb said that Guardian Nurses' advocacy services have been well received by LEHB members. He said they decided to go with Guardian Nurses after listening to presentations from about a dozen disease management programs, which manage the healthcare of patients with chronic diseases such as diabetes or heart disease.

"We were looking for an organization that would assist our members with a more hands-on approach," Lamb said.

Coleman said in addition to marketing their services with employers, unions and benefit administrators, Guardian Nurses also works directly with health insurance brokerages.

Among the brokers with which the company works is Carsten Pedersen, president of Patriot Benefits Group Inc. in Hatfield.

"I am a benefits expert," Pedersen said. "Doctors are medical experts. Patients are neither. I offer my clients healthcare advocacy services because I don't have that expertise."

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