

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Is There a Doctor in the Greenhouse?

Jennifer Zurko

I went to Metrolina to see poinsettias this past December, but what Abe Van Wingerden was really keen on talking about was the new Wellness Center being constructed at their Huntersville, North Carolina, facility. At the time, it was just a shell. But after a few months, The Metrolina Wellness Center is now accepting patients. On the first day it opened in February there was a line of people waiting for an appointment. “The response has been much bigger than we anticipated,” Abe said.

Metrolina has partnered with local health organizations Novant Healthcare and Presbyterian Hospital to help co-fund and co-staff the Wellness Center with a licensed—and bilingual—nurse practitioner. Abe is hoping that having a Wellness Center on site will allow his employees to be more diligent about getting preventative medical care before they decide to visit the emergency room or a condition worsens—which also means higher medical costs.

“Most of our employees only go to the doctor if it’s an emergency or to the ER for general care that weren’t actual emergencies, so our insurance claims have continued to go up,” explained Abe. “This also means premiums go up. The main driver [for the Wellness Center] is we know we have to take control of the process before it takes control of us. The likelihood of accessibility to healthcare becoming more difficult is a possibility, but the larger issue is getting our employees to use the healthcare system no matter what form it is provided in.”



Physician's Assistant Manuel Maldonado checks a patient's blood pressure.

Abe attributes the absence of annual check-ups to a feeling of unease, especially with many immigrant workers who aren't comfortable with the American healthcare model of having to visit a doctor for preventative care. Plus, with new healthcare reform coming next year, the uncertain future has many employees nervous.

“Difficulty in planning appointments, working within their work schedules, fear of a system they have not used

and just basic education of the benefits of good wellness and health are barriers we have to knock down,” said Abe. “The on-site Wellness Center at Metrolina Greenhouses begins that process of addressing those issues.”

Some of the services the Wellness Center will provide include blood pressure and cholesterol checks, plus mammogram screenings—all free for employees if they participate in Metrolina’s health care program. The nurse practitioner will help employees track their health, write prescriptions for basic illnesses and provide same-day appointments to an in-network doctor in the Novant system if additional care is needed. Right now, the Wellness Center is for Metrolina staff only who participate in the company’s 100%-funded individual health care program, but Abe said he might extend care to their families in the future.

“Bottom line, we are taking our employees’ health seriously, and this is a big step in showing them we can help them with their wellness,” stated Abe. “This is a new initiative that could be a model for companies in the future, especially in our industry.” **GT**