



# How to talk to employees about managing their health care choices



A new Massachusetts law, Chapter 224 of the Acts of 2012, will dramatically increase transparency in health care. It requires that health plans provide members with detailed cost and quality information to help them compare alternatives and make more informed decisions about their individual health care. In 2014, hospitals and physicians will be required to provide the same information.

This new law gives employers like you a unique chance to begin a new conversation with your employees about becoming more engaged in their health care choices. It's also an opportunity to empower your employees to base their health care choices utilizing quality comparisons and helping you hold down your company's health care costs.

Massachusetts employers and consumers pay the highest premiums in the country. High-deductible health plans, tiered networks, and transparency tools are the first steps in addressing high health care costs. Now is the time to start embracing a shared responsibility for health care and health benefits.

This Guide is designed to frame your employee discussions when introducing the new tools and resources now becoming available to health care consumers. During this era of change and enhanced transparency, this Guide will help maximize your employee communication strategies.

# Your message to employees

*Make sure your employees understand the transparency tools that are being made available to them for the first time and guide them on how they should approach their health care decisions. Help your employees care about health care.*

## Explore what's new.

There are more health care tools and resources available now than ever before, allowing you to do your own research before you ever step foot in a doctor's office. In addition to enhanced member service call centers, new web-based search and comparison tools are being launched for employees.

## Educate yourself.

Use the health plans' new transparency tools, as well as member services phone lines, to compare the cost and quality of different doctors, facilities and services. These tools can also be used to help you understand your condition or find out what's included in a particular course of treatment.

## Estimate your costs.

With the information you gather from your health plan, compare which hospital or which doctor is best for you. Learn what the service will cost you, how much is paid by insurance, and how much you have paid to date for co-pays, deductibles and co-insurance. Know your cost for each option.

## Evaluate your options.

Consult with your doctor and your network of family and friends to discuss what you have learned. Ask questions and start the conversation with your estimated costs. Be clear on a recommended procedure or preferred facility and inquire whether there are any alternatives for treatment.

## Engage in your care.

Using all of the information and resources available to you will help you make informed decisions about your medical care and ensure you get the right care at the right time in the right place. Using these tools soundly allows you to take the lead in your health care and its associated costs.

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## Transparency on cost and quality

*As employers provide new tools and enhanced resources for their employees to learn more about their health care choices, it is important to frame communications around the quality and cost considerations.*

### How to think about **quality**

Quality health care means care that is safe, effective, patient-centered, timely, efficient and equitable. It means getting the right care at the right time in the right place for the best possible outcome.

Quality is a measure that includes your personal values and priorities. Higher cost does not mean better quality. It is important to know quality and cost regardless of whether you or your health plan is paying for your medical care.

### How to think about **cost**

The total cost includes the co-pay, the deductible, and the cost covered by insurance.

Understanding your health care needs and options is important. Just as you wouldn't buy a new TV without doing research on the costs of various options, you shouldn't make a choice about health care without understanding the estimated cost of different treatment options.

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# Best practices in health care communications

*Communications experts from within the health care industry have provided proven strategies for sustaining transparency in employee health care communications.*

## 1. Understand your culture.

Determine when employees are most available to convene and which means of communication they prefer. Include spouses on outreach and invite them to information meetings about benefits.

**TIP:** Use electronic communications to reach your younger-generation, tech-savvy employees.

## 2. Focus on areas of need.

Understand where your company's health care costs are concentrated and provide solutions to help employees identify additional, more cost-effective methods to deal with those issues.

**TIP:** Request a utilization report from your broker to determine cost areas that can be addressed.

## 3. Be as transparent as possible.

Distribute information to employees on their compensation package that includes their salary plus the total cost of health insurance, consider including state/national averages on health care insurance costs.

**TIP:** Provide an annual individual employee report with individual costs, savings, and comparisons.

## 4. Communicate at least quarterly.

Talk about health care with your employees throughout the year in addition to open enrollment season to remind them about ways to reduce health care costs and to evaluate the quality of care they are receiving.

**TIP:** Schedule a company meeting to remind all employees of existing company wellness programs.

## 5. Recruit employee ambassadors.

Identify employee leaders to provide testimony on their positive experiences with their health plan options and their health care choices to help other employees with possible questions or concerns.

**TIP:** Invite employee representatives to be part of the health care plan selection process.

## 6. Think carefully about the language.

Resist the urge to brand your plan options using tiered language so employees will make their decisions based on the actual offerings in the plan that best suit them and their individual situation.

**TIP:** Avoid labeling your health plan options such as Gold, Silver, Bronze or Plus, Value, Basic.

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## Why Transparency Matters

*Communicating with your employees on their new role in managing health care costs also involves providing them with clear individualized information to help them make better-informed decisions.*

### Health insurance is a strategic asset

Health care is likely one of your company's biggest costs – and one of its most important tools for recruiting and retaining quality employees. Become a smarter consumer of health care insurance by knowing your company's risk profile.

### Brokers can provide added value

Know what you can expect of a broker – and be willing to ask about those details upfront. Good brokers will offer online tools, help companies develop employee effective communications, create examples and FAQs and more.

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# Resources

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Arguably, a company's most valuable partner in the health care discussion will be its health plan provider:

Your health plan representatives are available to help your company communicate with your employees - their health plan members.

Ask them to help educate your employees on the specifics of your company's plan. Have them explain the value of a tiered network or a high deductible plan, depending on what you offer. Invite them to demonstrate the transparency tools and the cost and quality resources that will now be available to them.

Be proactive and maximize your company's relationship with your health plan.

[www.aimnet.org](http://www.aimnet.org)

Associated Industries of Massachusetts.

[www.mass.gov/chia](http://www.mass.gov/chia)

Massachusetts Center for Health Information and Analysis has good material for employers and employees in terms of trends and reporting information.

[www.patientcarelink.org](http://www.patientcarelink.org)

Patient Care Link is a MHA-sponsored service providing data and resources for Massachusetts planholders and consumers

[www.healthcare.gov/glossary](http://www.healthcare.gov/glossary)

A broad overview glossary of health care terms that are important to be familiar with.

[www.mass.gov/ocabr](http://www.mass.gov/ocabr)

Office of Consumer Affairs provides guides on how to speak with your insurer and your provider.

# Lead sponsor

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Associated Industries of Massachusetts (AIM) is a dynamic and innovative association of Massachusetts employers. AIM is a leader in helping employers control the cost of health insurance - we support public policy designed to create an affordable health care system, and offer educational programs that help employers manage health costs. [www.aimnet.org](http://www.aimnet.org)

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