

# MANAGED CARE

## OUTLOOK

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### Basketball Teams Up With Asthma Education in Philadelphia

Getting children with asthma and their parents to attend a series of educational sessions about the disease can be a challenge. But when that educational material is combined with a popular sport such as basketball, families turn out in large numbers.

Keystone Mercy Health Plan, a Medicaid plan with 275,000 members in Pennsylvania, found out last summer how basketball can be used to motivate youngsters to learn about controlling their asthma. More than 130 children and their parents participated in basketball instruction, health assessments, and asthma education during the first annual Healthy Hoops program in 2003.

Healthy Hoops is a series of weekend meetings to teach children with asthma and their parents or guardians how to manage the condition. Once the day's health care education has concluded, the children learn basketball techniques from local professional and college coaches.

The program was developed by Dan Hilferty, president and CEO of Keystone Mercy Health Plan (KMHP), which is owned by Independence Blue Cross and Mercy Health System. The health plan was looking for a fun way to educate its members in Philadelphia about asthma, he recalls, and it seemed like basketball would be a good fit.

Basketball is such a big part of life in Philadelphia and urban communities, Hilferty says, that "we thought it would be a good way to entice the youngsters to participate." The idea broke fast and before long, an entire squad of participating organizations had been assembled.

The Healthy Hoops program requires that a parent or guardian be present at each of the sessions. There is an asthma education track for the adults and a basketball skills track for the youngsters. The program is divided over several sessions which take place during a three-month period.

After an opening session, the children have their asthma tested at various centers. Hilferty says this is done to get a sense of the severity of each child's asthma, to verify the medications he or she is taking, and to establish a baseline for each participant.

A series of "minicamps" is then held on weekends, Hilferty says, to help families understand the various medications that are used to control asthma. They also learn about

the need for proper rest and nutrition. Each session ends with coaches demonstrating basketball skills.

The finale of the program is a full-day basketball camp at a local university. Healthy Hoops brings in professional and college players and their coaches to instruct the children in the finer points of the game. The parents participate in a closing ceremony at the end of the program.



*A coach demonstrates a basketball move for a Healthy Hoops participant. Photo courtesy of Keystone Mercy Health Plan.*

It is no accident that the basketball clinics are scheduled after the asthma education at each meeting, notes Hilferty. There needs to be a balance of content between health education and basketball in order to keep both parents and children interested, he says. "If we did the basketball first, we run the risk of losing some of the parents and the children when it comes down to the educational piece."

Healthy Hoops has no trouble getting the children to sit through the educational content, he adds. "Initially I was concerned about that, but we have been pleasantly surprised at the enthusiasm that the parents and guardians have shown in learning more about the disease."

Families are also quite diligent about returning for each one of the sessions. Combining basketball and education keeps them coming back, Hilferty says. In the past, he notes, busy parents might not have made the time to attend an event focused solely on asthma education. But they do tend to turn out for Healthy Hoops. "When we made it a fun type of thing, where they could combine on a weekend the recreational activity with a learning experience, it has put them in a position where they have the time. Their child is occupied learning sports, [and] they have the opportunity to learn more about the disease."

Parents are excited to see their children participating in the sport, he says. Some of the children have not been able to play previously, but they can in the controlled environment with medical supervision that Healthy Hoops provides. Other children who were previously able to play sports find they can play longer because their asthma is under control after going through the Healthy Hoops program, Hilferty says.

KMHP has found that Healthy Hoops is producing improvements in asthma control. Among participants in last summer's program, there was a 29 percent increase in the number of children correctly and consistently using prescribed controller therapy, and a 34 percent drop in the number of children visiting the emergency department. There was also an 8 percent decline in the number of children requiring hospital admissions.

Last summer's program was held in West Philadelphia, and it went so well that this year KMHP is expanding it to North Philadelphia. Hilferty says the program's concept may also be exported to South Carolina and other states where AmeriHealth Mercy has health plans. "My vision is that ultimately we'll have this program or like programs in all the areas where we do business."

But he says basketball may not be the biggest draw in other locations. For example, KMHP is planning to bring the concept to Harrisburg, Penn., but youngsters there have more of an interest in soccer or baseball than basketball. The educational component can stay the same no matter where the program is replicated, he says, but the sport that is involved may have to change to capture local interest.

In Philadelphia, Hilferty says KMHP has had no trouble getting local sports figures involved in the program. Hilferty played college basketball in the area, so he already knew several of the coaches. When he approached them about participating in Healthy Hoops, they all enthusiastically got on board. Players for the Philadelphia 76ers and the Harlem Globetrotters have visited the camps, as has the mascot for the 76ers. ■

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