CASE STUDY

IMA Healthcare Practice: Tailored Employee Benefits Strategies for Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs)

Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) play a vital role in delivering comprehensive care to underserved communities, but they face unique challenges in managing employee benefits. With enhanced reimbursements under Medicare and Medicaid, access to 340B drug pricing, and a focus on integrated care, FQHCs have opportunities to optimize benefits for cost efficiency and workforce resilience. However, staffing shortages — reported by over 70% of FQHCs according to recent surveys — exacerbate issues like burnout, high turnover, and recruitment difficulties, often driven by non-competitive salaries and fragmented benefits.

At IMA, we specialize in crafting employee health plan strategies that align with FQHC priorities: predictable costs, maximized 340B capture, local care steerage, and improved retention. Drawing from our 30+ years serving FQHCs and other healthcare entities (including ambulatory centers, physician groups, and community providers), we leverage Partnerly's tech-enabled tools and our IMA Pharmacy Consulting to deliver transparent, flexible solutions that reduce risk and enhance engagement.

THE CHALLENGE: WORKFORCE AND BENEFITS PRESSURES IN FQHCS

FQHCs must balance serving vulnerable populations while attracting and retaining talent in a competitive landscape. **Key challenges include:**

- **Staffing Shortages and Retention:** Over 70% of FQHCs report shortages in physicians, nurses, and mental health providers, with turnover driven by burnout and inadequate benefits. Recruitment is hindered by rural locations and limited resources.
- **Cost and Compliance Pressures:** Rising healthcare expenses, coupled with fiduciary risks (e.g., ERISA compliance for self-insured plans), demand prudent vendor management and transparent pricing — especially for pharmacy benefits under 340B.
- **Care Integration and Efficiency:** Standard “off-the-shelf” plans often lack customization, failing to steer care to in-house clinicians or integrate with FQHC resources, missing opportunities for cost savings and better outcomes.
- **Regulatory and Financial Hurdles:** Navigating value-based payments, enhanced reimbursements, and 340B programs requires strategies that retain rebates, surplus, and local control without excessive administrative burden.

Without tailored benefits, FQHCs risk higher costs, disengaged staff, and reduced ability to fulfill their mission.

IMA'S STRATEGIES:
GENERAL APPROACHES FOR FQHC SUCCESS

IMA empowers FQHCs with proactive, data-driven strategies to elevate benefits and mitigate risks.
Our approach includes:

+ **Custom Plan Design and Funding:**
  Develop self-funded or level-funded models with flexible tiers, ensuring cost stability and 100% retention of claims surplus and rebates. We incorporate people analytics for population health strategies and wellbeing programs to combat burnout.
+ **340B Optimization and Pharmacy Transparency:**
  Through IMA Pharmacy Consulting, we negotiate PBM contracts for full rebate pass-through, steerage to preferred 340B pharmacies, and competitive pricing — reducing overpayments and aligning with FQHC's in-house capabilities.
+ **Network Customization and Care Steerage:**
  Build tiered provider networks that prioritize FQHC clinicians and partners, maximizing local care delivery, integrated management, and reduced underwriting markups on in-network services.
+ **Integrated Care Management and Engagement:**
  Partner with carriers for seamless integration of FQHC practice-based resources with external care managers. Use Partnerly's Ask Charlie for employee navigation, boosting satisfaction and retention via tech-forward tools like app access and voice mode.
+ **Fiduciary and Compliance Support:**
  Facilitate committee formation, vendor RFPs, benchmarking, and documentation to ensure ERISA prudence, drawing on our expertise in value-based payments and workforce-focused innovations.
+ **Recruitment and Retention Focus:**
  Align benefits with FQHC goals, such as preventive care at no cost, low copays for local services, and wellness initiatives that foster a learning culture and equity — helping attract diverse talent.

These strategies are backed by our experience with 400+ healthcare clients, including FQHCs, managing $470M in premiums and investing 2x the industry average in resources.

CASE STUDY:
COLLABORATIVE EMPLOYEE HEALTH PLAN FOR MAINE FQHCS

IMA'S ENGAGEMENT (ADAPTED FROM ACADIA PILOT):

Building on Acadia's framework, IMA would facilitate a similar customized platform:

+ **Plan Administration and Reinsurance:** Transitioned to flexible TPA and reinsurance for 100% surplus retention and predictable monthly costs.
+ **Provider and Pharmacy Networks:** Created a Tier 1 network prioritizing FQHC clinicians and partners, with PBM steering to 340B pharmacies via $10/30/50 copays.
+ **Care Management:** Integrated local FQHC teams with carrier resources for more impactful coaching and engagement.
+ **Implementation Timeline:** From proposal review in February to effective coverage in July, including open enrollment and ID card delivery.

CLIENT PROFILE:

Eastport Health Care, Inc., a Maine FQHC serving rural communities, in collaboration with the Maine Primary Care Association (MPCA) and Acadia Benefits. This pilot expanded to Phase 1 for multiple FQHCs starting January 2025.

THE PROBLEM:

Eastport's existing level-funded plan lacked customization, with the carrier retaining 50% of surplus and 100% of rebates. No steerage to local providers or 340B pharmacies led to inefficiencies, higher costs, and limited integration with practice-based care — compounding recruitment challenges in a talent-scarce region.

RESULTS:

+ **Cost Efficiency:** Retained 100% of rebates and surplus, eliminated underwriting markups on local care, and achieved projected savings through transparent pricing.
+ **Improved Retention:**Flexible benefits (e.g., no-cost preventive care, low copays at preferred sites) enhanced employee satisfaction, aiding recruitment in underserved areas.
+ **Enhanced Outcomes:** Maximized 340B capture and local steerage reduced risk, improved care management, and aligned with FQHC's mission — positioning for scalable rollout to other Maine centers.

This model demonstrates how IMA adapts proven collaborations to FQHC needs nationwide.

WHY CHOOSE IMA?

As an independent advisor serving FQHCs across the continuum, IMA offers unbiased expertise without the conflicts of larger brokers. Our integration with Partnerly ensures scalable, employee-centered solutions, while our core values — relationships, equity, and results — drive strategies that support diverse workforces and community health. With direct market access and advanced consulting (e.g., population health, cyber risk), we turn benefits into a competitive advantage.

Discover how IMA can customize an employee health plan strategy for your FQHC.

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