

3,100 Wal-Mart employees get Washington health aid

OLYMPIA — More than 3,100 Wal-Mart employees in Washington — nearly half of them full-time workers — benefited from state-subsidized health coverage in 2004, reported the Seattle Times newspaper.

That total is much higher than previously thought. And it indicates that 22 percent of Wal-Mart's 16,000 employees in the state were getting taxpayer-funded health care.

The Center for a Changing Workforce, a nonprofit public policy organization, estimates that state taxpayers paid an estimated \$9.25 million for Wal-Mart health care subsidies in 2004. The group estimates the cost in the 2005-2006 biennium to be \$21.7 million. The center also estimates that for each additional store Wal-Mart opens in Washington State, it costs taxpayers an additional \$136,000 per year in Medicaid subsidies alone.

"I think taxpayers should be outraged," Rep. Steve Conway, D-Tacoma, told the Seattle Times. "They are subsidizing one of the wealthiest corpora-

tions in the world."

The Washington Legislature has introduced a labor-backed bill that would require companies with 5,000 or more employees to put a minimum of 9 percent of their payroll costs toward health care benefits.

Citing state and federal confidentiality rules, the state last month provided two reports to only a handful of legislators and legislative staff members. Copies of those reports were leaked to The Seattle Times.

One of the reports shows that throughout 2004 an average 3,180 Wal-Mart employees were receiving state-funded medical assistance, including Medicaid, for themselves or for a dependent. The other report shows that 456 Wal-Mart employees were on the state's Basic Health Plan that year. Nearly 1,800 employees in those programs worked full-time.

The Basic Health Plan (BHP) is funded entirely by the state and covers low-income adults — primarily families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. That would mean a family of four with an income of about \$38,000 would be eligible.

The state reports showed McDonald's restaurants second with an average 1,824 employees receiving Medicaid benefits in 2004 and Safeway third with 1,539 employees on Medicaid. Nearly all of those were part-time employees.

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