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Wal-Mart still top user of state health care funds

Washington taxpayers will pay \$18.6 million in 2006 to subsidize world's largest corporation

OLYMPIA, Wash. — Two new state surveys show Wal-Mart still ranks No. 1 in Washington for the number of employees using public health care programs, even though it is not one of the state's largest employers.

An analysis of the report by Seattle's non-profit Center for a Changing Workforce projected the cost to state taxpayers at \$18.2 million for 2006, based on state survey reports released earlier this month.

The January and June 2006 surveys by the Health Care Authority and the Department of Social and Health Services counted 3,194 Wal-Mart employees either enrolled in Medicaid or the Basic Health Plan (BHP), or with enrolled dependents. There were an additional 2,943 dependents enrolled. The agencies placed the total cost to state taxpayers at more than \$1.5 million per month, based on 2006 budget figures.

While Wal-Mart is once again the largest beneficiary from state health care programs, it is not the largest employer in the state. Boeing, Microsoft, Safeway and Kroger each have more employees, but all four of the largest employers combined have fewer employees using public health care pro-

grams than Wal-Mart.

The cost of Wal-Mart's state health care subsidies for 2006 exceeds:

- The combined cost of health care subsidies to all of its major discount store competitors: Home Depot, Costco, Sears, K-Mart and Target.

- The combined cost of health care subsidies to all of its major grocery store competitors: Safeway, Fred Meyer, Albertsons, QFC and Haggen's.

"Wal-Mart's ads claim 'our people make the difference'," said David West, director of the Center for a Changing Workforce. "And the company calls itself a 'family-friendly' business, but this report reveals that it's Washington's taxpayers who really make the difference when it comes to taking care of Wal-Mart employees and their families."

In January 2006, the Washington State Senate Committee staff estimated the cost of Wal-Mart's combined Medicaid and Basic Health Plan health care subsidies at \$12,100,464. Based on the new agency reports, the previous estimate was 50 percent too low.


The new figures show that 11 percent of Washington Wal-Mart employees are in the adult Medicaid program. That's more than double the figure Wal-Mart claimed existed in a recent internal memo. Another 11 percent of the company's employees have children enrolled in the Medicaid kids program.

A majority of Wal-Mart's employees who are Medicaid beneficiaries were working full-time (35+ hours per week), according to a January 2006 report based on an analysis of the 2004 numbers by the Seattle Times. At Wal-Mart's average wage of \$9.68 an hour, full-time employees can qualify for Medicaid in Washington. Workers at the other companies on the list were primarily part-time workers.

The number of Wal-Mart employees on Medicaid and the BHP in 2004 were slightly higher — 3,636 on both Medicaid and BHP, but because the agencies used a different method to count employees and dependents this year, comparisons to 2004 aren't meaningful. The 2006 numbers are a large jump from 2002, when a state survey found 794 Wal-Mart employees as Medicaid and BHP clients. This year, the comparable number is 1,512 direct clients (not counting dependents), a 9 percent increase from 2002.

During the same time period, the company's employment increased by about 30 percent, from 12,000 to 16,000.

In the 2006 session, the Washington State Legislature considered, but did not act on legislation which would have required Wal-Mart and other large employers to contribute more toward the cost of employee health care.




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