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More docs on board with Blue Cross network

Agreement resolves years of negotiations between insurer, St. Luke's

Blue Cross of Idaho has added 57 Twin Falls physicians to its preferred provider organization, filling a hole in its Magic Valley services, the insurance company announced Thursday. The doctors, all from St. Luke's Clinic Magic Valley, had been in talks with the company about the program for years - at least since 2004, when the state of Idaho moved its health insurance to Blue Cross from competitor Regence BlueShield of Idaho.

"This addition to our network strengthens our coverage in the Magic Valley and gives our members additional options for health care services," said Ray Flachbart, Blue Cross president and CEO, in a press release.

A PPO is a network of health-care providers who contract with a company - Blue Cross, in this case - to offer care at a reduced price.

State Sen. [Chuck Coiner](#), R-Twin Falls, had long urged both parties to resolve the matter, concerned about the fact that state employees in his district didn't have access to the PPO network. The PPO is one of two options available to them, and roughly 70 percent of active employees statewide who enrolled in health insurance last April signed up for it. On Friday, Coiner said the agreement was "too long in coming," but that he's glad to see a resolution worked out.

"Hopefully now we won't be driving our state employees to have to go elsewhere to seek their medical services," Coiner said. "There will be people here to serve them with their insurance."

During the discussions, hospital officials and physicians said they were holding out for a plan that addressed issues such as improving the quality of care, not just a simple fee schedule. On Friday, Debbie Kytile, St. Luke's executive director of physician services, said the groups have committed to work together on a number of items, citing pharmaceutical costs as one example.

St. Luke's, she said, is very happy to work with Blue Cross and others to "really look at how we can improve the system, because it's very broken today." Blue Cross spokesman Stewart Johnson declined on Friday to say more about the negotiations or the quality-of-care projects.

Prior to the agreement, Johnson said 76 percent of Magic Valley physicians participated in the PPO plan, compared to 93 percent in the company's traditional network. Updated figures provided Thursday state 181 area physicians - 92 percent - are now part of the PPO, and 94 percent in the traditional network.

The St. Luke's-owned clinics have 84 providers, 69 of them physicians, Kytile said. Some of them were already PPO members, and the hospital itself was already in the PPO.

Kytile said officials and doctors had heard from patients asking them to join the PPO. She said she expects to see some area employers switch back to offering the PPO coverage. "I think the community will be pleased to hear this," she said.