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Gripes drop for Medicaid claims

BOISE -- A new government evaluation found Idaho's health care providers are having a much better experience working with a California company that processes the state's Medicaid claims.

In 2010, Molina Medicaid Solutions began handling claims and issuing payments on behalf of the state. Dozens of health care companies complained, however, saying the new system was ineffective and they were not being paid for their work.

A 2011 audit by the state's Office of Performance Evaluations found that 72 percent of the state's Medicaid providers either were "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied" with the claims process a year ago. But a follow-up report released Monday by the same auditing group noted numerous improvements.

After surveying 5,068 of the state's approximately 10,000 Medicaid providers, the auditors reported that 59 percent of providers said Molina either is doing "better" or "much better" than when then the system was introduced.

The most recent report found that two of health care providers' most common complaints -- number of claims that were delayed and the ability to reach Molina customer service representatives -- were addressed.

Wait time to reach customer service agents, for example, decreased from an average of more than 35 minutes in August 2010 to less than two minutes this month. Del Bell, Molina's executive account manager based in Idaho, said the company improved its performance by increasing the number of Idaho employees and launching new training programs tailored toward the state's system.

"We appreciate the recognition from providers who said they have seen improvements, but we're not going to sit back," Bell said. "We're going to focus on those who are still not happy."

For the week of Jan. 15, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare spokesman Tom Shanahan said, customer service "on hold" times averaged just one minute and three seconds. At one minute, providers can cope with that pretty easily," Shanahan said. "Looking back, 38 minutes was totally unrealistic."

Still, this week's report found that one-third of Idaho's Medicaid providers are not satisfied with Molina's performance today. Looking ahead, Bell said Molina employees will focus on improving communications with the state and providers to help spread information about how the system works and what changes were made.

Sue Filutze, billing manager at the Idaho Falls-based Pearl Health Clinic, said her experience with Molina has improved markedly. In early 2011, Filutze said, her company had not been paid for about \$100,000 of valid claims. But on Tuesday, Filutze said her company has received what it was owed and experienced improved customer service.

"Once we got the initial problems straightened out, which took about six months, we began to get paid and it has worked out pretty well," Filutze said.

Filutze said she began noticing improvements after Rep. Janice McGeachin, an Idaho Falls Republican who heads the House Health and Welfare Committee, called for the initial audit of Molina's performance.

"I think that once she got involved, a good many problems started becoming resolved, but it's sad it takes the state government to get involved before things get better," Filutze said.

McGeachin said she will continue to monitor the experiences of local businesses.

"Everybody acknowledges the situation is improving, but it's important to follow up on additional concerns and problems out there," McGeachin said. Providers hounded McGeachin with complaints about Molina in 2010, leading her to call for the audit. "The response from the provider community was something that couldn't be ignored," McGeachin said.

The latest Office of Performance Evaluations report found that Molina enacted or addressed each of the four main recommendations issued following the original 2011 investigation.