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**IA Medicaid Employers**

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DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) - Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, tops a list of Iowa employers with the most workers who receive health care paid for by state taxpayers, according to documents obtained by The Associated Press.

Wal-Mart employs 845 workers in Iowa who received health benefits from the state's Medicaid program last year, according to a report by the Iowa Department of Human Services. The report was obtained by the AP in a public records request.

Tyson Fresh Meats Inc., the worldwide meat supplier, Casey's General Stores and Hy-Vee Inc. also have hundreds of employees receiving state assistance to pay for their health care, according to the Jan. 25 report.

Critics say Iowa taxpayers are subsidizing labor costs for profitable companies that offer inadequate wages and benefits to workers.

Medicaid, the joint state -federal health care program for the poor and disabled, was not "meant to provide health insurance for people who have jobs with large companies," said Philip Mattera, research director for Good Jobs First, an advocacy group in Washington.

"Medicaid was designed for people who were in the poverty population and weren't working," he said.

Wal-Mart made \$10 billion in profits last year. Meanwhile, Iowa faces a \$170 million deficit in its Medicaid budget over the next 18 months, and officials are considering tightening eligibility requirements and cutting services.

Wal-Mart says it helps remove people from public assistance by providing jobs and health benefits to people who may otherwise be unemployed. The company says 5 percent of its hourly work force receives Medicaid, compared to 7 percent three months before they were hired.

Still, the Iowa report adds to data in several states showing Wal-Mart has a high number of employees receiving Medicaid. With 17,000 workers, Wal-Mart is the state's second largest employer.

"We can't verify the numbers on these programs, but as the nation's largest employer we will almost by default be the largest on many types of lists," said Wal-Mart spokesman Dan Fogleman.

Hy-Vee, the grocer that is the state's largest employer with 24,500 workers, had 361 employees who received Medicaid during the same period.

Tyson and Casey's had the next most employees on the list behind Wal-Mart, with 388 and 371, respectively.

Bills introduced last week in the Iowa Legislature would require the state to publish annual reports on employers

whose workers most often seek public aid. Armed with such information, the state could pressure the companies to increase health benefits.

Sen. Joe Bolkcom, D-Iowa City, said the legislation would allow the state to understand how many of the employees on Medicaid were part-time or full-time.

"If Wal-Mart has full-time employees that are on Medicaid, that's outrageous," he said. "This is a company making billions of dollars in profit a year with their low prices, but they also have a concurrent responsibility to not foist off the health care costs of their employees on Iowa taxpayers."

In January, the governor's office asked DHS to compile a report on employers. DHS matched the social security numbers of Iowans who received Medicaid benefits in the one-year period ending Oct. 1, 2004 with those submitted by employers to Iowa Workforce Development.

Wal-Mart, which has 60 stores in Iowa, says its average Iowa wage is \$9.90 per hour. Employees can purchase individual health insurance for \$38 per month or \$153 a month for a family. Critics say that's too expensive for many workers.

A spokeswoman at Broadlawns Medical Center in Des Moines, Polk County's public hospital, said almost two-thirds of its 32,000 patients last year were uninsured, and a majority of them were working poor between the ages of 19 and 35.

"It isn't that these companies don't offer health insurance," spokeswoman Mikki Stier said. "It's that they offer minimum wage jobs and the employees can't afford health insurance."

On the Net:

Wal-Mart: <http://www.walmart.com/>

Good Jobs First: <http://www.goodjobsfirst.org/>

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