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**WAL-MART CULTURE Wal-Mart tops state CHIP list Retailer stands out in program for uninsured kids
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CHIP cases

Top five employers

identified in CHIP cases:

Wal-Mart 452

Asplundh 146

McDonald's 100

Respite Care 97

U.S. Postal

Service 94

Source: West Virginia DHHR

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The parents of children enrolled in West Virginia's program for uninsured kids work in retail stores, fast-food restaurants and even post offices.

But the employer that appears most often in the program's rolls is Wal-Mart, the state's largest private employer, according to an analysis prepared for the Sunday Gazette-Mail by the state's Bureau for Children and Families.

Four hundred and fifty-two people - the most for any employer in the state - listed Wal-Mart on their applications with the state's Children's Health Insurance Program.

That's about three times the number of people who listed the next highest company, Asplundh, a Pennsylvania tree-trimming firm whose workers are often seasonal, and nearly five times as many as those who listed McDonald's, which ranked third.

CHIP's figure represents about 4 percent of the Bentonville, Ark. -based retailers' West Virginia workers.

"The fact is Wal-Mart offers affordable health care to our associates," said Dan Fogleman, Wal-Mart spokesman.

"It is safe to say we do not design our plan to be supplemented by any public assistance program and we don't encourage our employees to use them."

The executive director of CHIP, Sharon Carte, said the employer ranking shows large chain stores, fast-food restaurants and similar businesses don't often provide health benefits at the levels of other employers.

Workers turn to CHIP and other programs paid for by taxpayers when they can't get coverage for themselves or their families at their jobs.

"From a health-care policy standpoint, we are all paying for it somehow," Carte said.

CHIP provides health coverage for about 24,000 children in the state who meet the criteria. A family of four would have to make less than \$37,700 a year to qualify.

Wal-Mart employs 11,450 people in West Virginia. Asplundh has about 1,100 workers in the state. McDonald's did not provide employee numbers for this story, but the state's Bureau of Employment ranked the fast-food giant as West Virginia's 72nd-largest private employer in March 2004, tied with Asplundh.

But the president of the West Virginia AFL-CIO believes Wal-Mart, which is not unionized, can afford to do better.

"Wal-Mart could be one of the biggest problems in the health-care system in this state and this country," said Kenny Perdue, who blamed what he described as an emphasis on part-time positions, inadequate benefits and low wages for many of the retailer's workers.

Wal-Mart's benefits are "very competitive with other retailers," Fogleman said. The company offers a broad range of benefits including medical and dental coverage, he said.

A full-time Wal-Mart employee is eligible for medical benefits through the company after a few months of work. For individual coverage, a person pays \$15.25 each biweekly pay period, Fogleman said.

For family coverage, the price goes up to \$66.25 every two weeks.

Full-time Wal-Mart employees work 34 hours a week and earn, on average, \$9.98 an hour. That means a single worker's pay every two weeks, before taxes, is \$678.64. Workers at stores in metro areas earn 40 cents an hour more than the average, Fogleman said.

So full-time Wal-Mart employees, on average, must pay about a 10th of their gross income if they want family coverage from the company.

About a quarter of Wal-Mart's workers nationwide are part time. Assuming that figure is constant in West Virginia, 2,863 of Wal-Mart's employees here are part-time.

And part-time Wal-Mart workers are not eligible for family medical coverage and become eligible for individual coverage after two years with the company, Fogleman said.

And offering benefits to part-time workers is something you won't find at many of Wal-Mart's competitors, he said.

"One of the most interesting statistics, I think, is we're projecting our company will spend \$4.3 billion on benefits we provide our associates," Fogleman said. "That's an impressive figure for a company that earned just under \$9 billion [in profit] last year."

But like Perdue, other Wal-Mart critics contend its wages and benefits are so poor a bigger share of its workers must rely on assistance funded by taxpayers.

In Georgia, a 2002 survey of that state's program for uninsured children found about 10,000 of the 166,000 kids

enrolled in the program had a parent working for Wal-Mart. The number was about 14 times the number for the state's next highest employer, according to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

A study earlier this year by the Center for Labor Research and Education at the University of California at Berkeley found Wal-Mart workers in the state cost taxpayers an estimated \$86 million annually in health-related and other assistance.

Families of Wal-Mart employees in the state used an estimated 40 percent more in health care paid for by the public, on average, than families of employees who worked for other large retail stores in the state, the study found. Wal-Mart decried the study, and its authors, as being pro-labor.

Pat White, who runs a free health clinic in Charleston, said the burden in West Virginia could be even worse, per person, because of the poorer health of the state's residents.

White, whose Health Right clinic saw more than 17,000 patients last year, said the CHIP list and Wal-Mart's top spot aren't surprising. Since January, 372 current or former Wal-Mart workers have come to Health Right for their prescription drugs or for medical or dental care. Sixty percent of Health Right's patients work.

"I think it's an employer's responsibility to try to come up with insurance products that enable their employees to have a sense of security," White said.

But if Wal-Mart provides competitive benefits, as Fogleman says, why does the retailer receive so much flak?

"We take all criticism seriously, and where it's valid we use it as an opportunity to improve," he said. "But for whatever reason, there are numerous groups out there that don't want us to succeed."

For more information about the Children's Health Insurance Program, call (877) 982-2447 or visit www.wvchip.org. You can apply over the phone, online or by mail.

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