

The Alliance is helping business confidently navigate the changing health benefit landscape

BY LAURIE ARENDT



TWENTY YEARS AGO, seven Madison-area business leaders founded The Alliance, a member-owned, not-for-profit cooperative that would ultimately help hundreds of self-funded employers improve the value of employee health benefits. With health care reform now the law of the land, the experience of The Alliance is critical—and policy makers are taking note of it.

Thanks to the active participation of its members, The Alliance has become a resource for policy makers looking for employers' perspective on health policy. The role is consistent with its founding mission to become a unified voice for employers to negotiate contracts with health care providers, a task they have performed so well that 160 employers are now members of The Alliance, covering 83,000 individuals in Wisconsin and neighboring counties in Iowa and Illinois.

Their mission has grown along with the membership: Moving health care forward to control costs, improve quality and engage individuals in their health. Today, The Alliance has become a trusted resource in many facets of health benefits, from cost and quality transparency to plan design, wellness programs and today's vital topic: the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA).

"Whether it's health care reform or an initiative outside of the legislative arena, we are committed to providing members with unbiased information," says Alliance CEO Cheryl DeMars. "In addition, we want to help policy makers understand the collective priorities of employers—that whatever we do in the name of reform, we have to simultaneously find ways to control costs—to focus on total value."

That was a recurring thought among employers at a roundtable recently hosted by The Alliance, where members had the opportunity to talk to each other and a benefits attorney about PPACA. "Health care reform means new requirements for all employers, whether they self fund or fully insure their plans," DeMars said. She said much of the discussion focused

on the issue of grandfathering, and The Alliance responded by advocating with federal regulators and legislators on changes employers felt were needed.

"It's critical that government regulators give employers flexibility so they can continue to work on cost-effective solutions," DeMars said. "Employers provide much of the innovation and leadership we need to control costs, and they are willing to partner with both government and health care providers when it comes to improvement."

When asked specifically about PPACA's impact on self-funding, DeMars said the reasons employers self fund are unchanged by PPACA—more control over cost drivers, greater flexibility in plan design, ability to offer uniform benefits across state lines and reaping the benefits of their investments to improve the health of their employees. She said certain provisions of PPACA that have yet to be developed hold promise in enhancing these benefits, and believes policy makers should listen to employers when developing ideas like payment reform and comparative effectiveness research.

Wendy Culver, human resources director for Mead & Hunt and Alliance health policy committee and board member, agrees. She says many Wisconsin companies actually have an advantage. "A lot of what has gone on here in Wisconsin is now playing out on the national front," says Culver, noting that long-term Alliance members such as Mead & Hunt have been examining these issues for years. "Many of our companies are ahead of the curve in terms of trying to maximize the returns on their health care plans."

The overarching goal of The Alliance has remained consistent through the years. "Purchasers want actionable information about health care, and more value from it," DeMars said. "We can make progress on those goals when stakeholders come together, and we're here to ensure employers are at the table when that happens."

www.the-alliance.org/healthpolicy.aspx

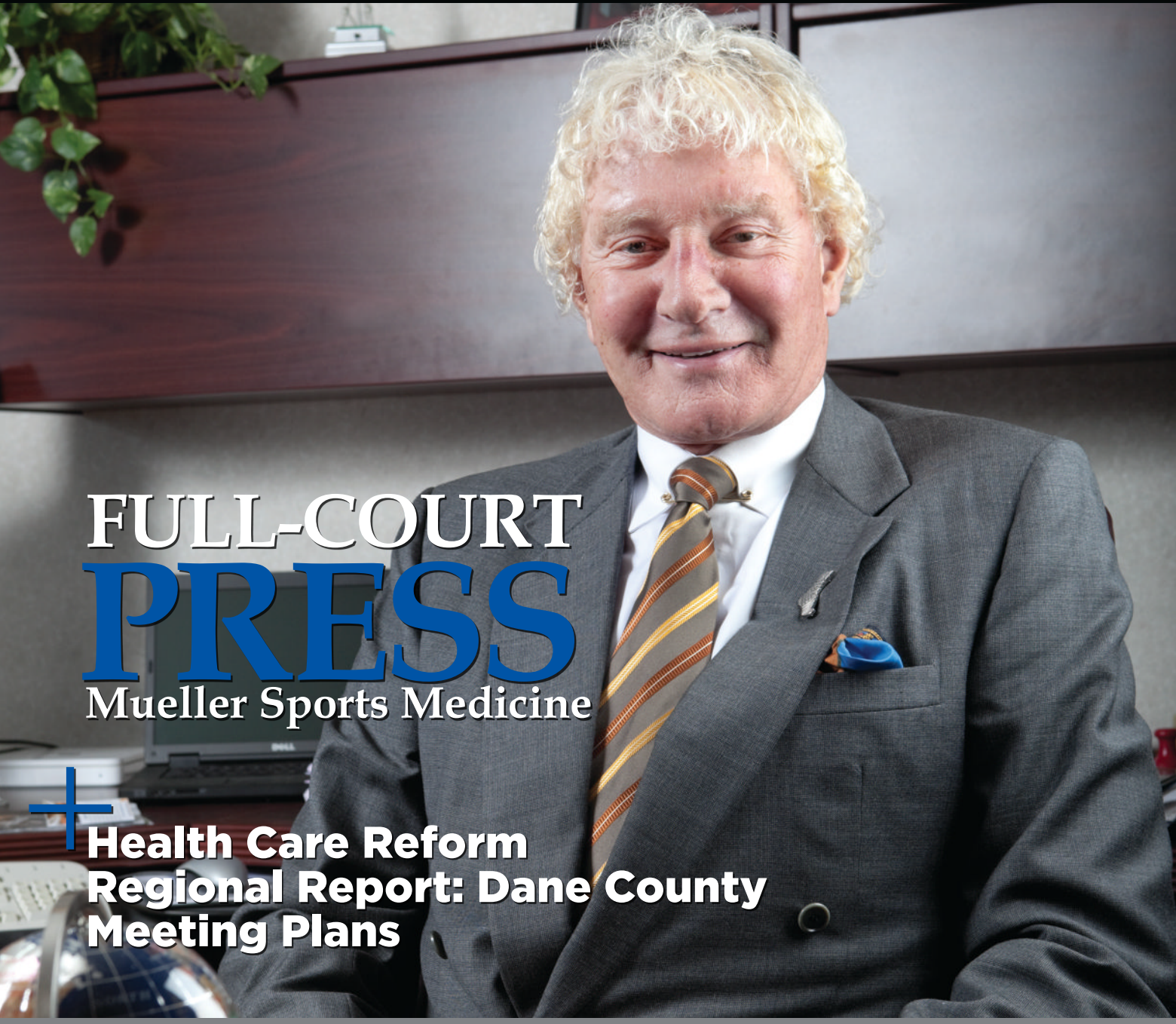




CORPORATE REPORT

WISCONSIN'S BUSINESS MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2010



FULL-COURT **PRESS** Mueller Sports Medicine

**+ Health Care Reform
Regional Report: Dane County
Meeting Plans**