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Caption: Anja Schacher, manager of the Concierge Colorado service at Littleton Adventist Hospital, shops at The Container Store, 8687 Park Meadows Center Drive in Douglas County, for Debra O'Brien, a nurse. The service runs errands for hospital staff. EVAN SEMON / ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

CAPTION: Perks for nurses. See graphic archive. ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Concierge service steps to the rescue

Source: Rachel Brand, Rocky Mountain News

It was a classic single mother's dilemma.

Ann Carrier's cupboard was bare, and the nurse manager at Littleton Adventist Hospital had to pick up her 2-year-old from the baby sitter. But the notion of taking a hungry toddler to the supermarket at 5:30 p.m. conjured images of tears and tantrums.

Carrier called Concierge Colorado, becoming the first customer for the five-month-old service that runs errands for the hospital's 950-person staff.

Concierges once were relegated to hotel desks. Now, companies in highly competitive industries are adding concierge services to recruit and retain employees.

North Suburban Medical Center, Presbyterian/St. Luke's Medical Center, Rose Medical Center and Sky Ridge Medical Center have been offering concierge services since 2004. Littleton Adventist added the service in November.

"The feedback we get from employees has been great," said Linda Kanamine, a spokeswoman for the HealthOne system.

A band of "doers" buys groceries, picks up dry cleaning and stands in line at the post office for employees at no charge to the employee beyond the cost of the product or service.

Carrier has become a regular.

"It gives me time - time that I can use to watch a video with my baby instead of going to King Soopers and fighting with her," she said.

Hospital concierge services are "in their infancy," according to a survey by Modern Healthcare magazine, but companies are looking at adding the product as a way of differentiating themselves.

Concierge Colorado, a local company, charges Littleton Adventist \$100,000 a year.

Director of Human Resources Joe Condon believes it will boost employee loyalty in a highly competitive job market, although it's too soon to track results.

"We ask our caregivers to give a lot of themselves," Condon said. "We thought, 'How do we help them balance the demands of work and home?'"

Certainly, nurses are in high demand. The federal government estimates that Colorado had 29,676 nurses in 2005 and needed 33,911, a 12.5 percent shortfall.

Registered nurses must have either a two-year associate's degree or a four-year bachelor's degree, and they take home an average salary of \$41,642. Nurses with a master's degree can earn up to \$60,000 before overtime.

Teri Fouts, an infusion-center nurse at Littleton Adventist, gets about 15 phone calls from recruiters a year.

She's reached the top of her pay scale - about \$60,000 a year - so other benefits such as the **concierge service** motivate her now.

"They've really freed up my time," Fouts said. "My house stays cleaner. I have more time to exercise. The biggest thing is, I don't go home exhausted."

The 600-member National Concierge Association doesn't track exactly how many concierges are in business, but Executive Director Sarah Ann Kasner said the business "has literally exploded."

"The medical field is one of the fastest-growing segments," she added.

Tom Wheeler, the founder of Concierge Colorado, said his strangest errand was picking up a dead cat and burying it.

His most pleasurable was planning an engagement party.

Most commonly, his workers fetch stamps or drop off packages at the post office.

Wheeler can rattle off numerous arguments for concierge services.

First, the average errand takes a person 2 1/2 hours, but Concierge Colorado workers combine six employees' grocery lists in one trip - generating efficiencies.

Second, the business saves companies money because workers don't extend lunch breaks to get their oil changed.

Result: more productive employees.

Finally, workers are less distracted.

"It's the concept of 'presenteeism,'" he says. "It's 'How here are you when you are here?' When people are distracted at the hospital, people die."