

BENEFITS FIRM INKS STATEWIDE ALLIANCE

LIBERTY BENEFIT INSURANCE AND EMPLOYER'S GROUP MIGHT BOTH ENJOY A BOOM

KATHY ROBERTSON / STAFF WRITER

A San Jose-based benefits outfit that caters to midsized and large employers has signed a statewide alliance with an employers' association here that could boost enrollment for both.

Liberty Benefit Insurance Services signed a deal May 18 with the California Association of Employers that allows Liberty to market its benefits program to businesses that belong to the association.

Liberty clients, in turn, get access to all the human-resource services offered by the association through free membership.

The agreement benefits employers signed up with either partner and puts both Liberty and the association in a good position to grow. Liberty plans to open a Sacramento office this summer.

"We will be introducing our clients to each other," said Craig Gottwals, a feisty lawyer-turned-benefits-broker who shook up the Sacramento market when he came to town in January 2003 and offered to take a free look at employers' benefits to see if he could get them a better deal. "This is a whole new suite of services."

"We're a nonprofit always trying to do more for our members," said Kim Parker, executive vice president of the association. "Now we can say, 'Here's where to go to find out how to get the most bang for your buck in insurance.'"

A package of services: Liberty Benefit handles benefits for roughly 3,500 Sacramento-area employees, with about four times that number currently under review. If the review shows Liberty can't save an employer money, it doesn't charge a fee....

Gottwals' legal experience makes Liberty's package a little different, but there's a growing market for offerings like his, with a range of human resources and benefits services....

The main selling point for Pulse Healthcare Staffing was the free legal advice, said Jane Rusmintratip, human-resources manager for Citrus Heights based company. "That sets them apart along with customer service," she said. Pulse, which has about 700 external nurse employees and 40 staffers, became a Liberty client this year.

Meet the group: The association, founded in 1937 in the Bay Area, first offered labor law information to employers concerned about the growth of unions in the region.

Over the years the organization has shifted its focus to human resources, offering a range of services from employee handbooks to assistance with injury and illness-prevention programs, discrimination claims and wage and hour compliance.

The group has satellite offices across the state to serve about 400 member employers from Eureka to San Diego.... The idea is to offer personal human-resource counseling to employers by assigning a staff member to each company.

Eagle Ridge Construction joined a year ago, looking for help to comply with California's frequently changing employment laws. The Sacramento-based company has 49 employees.

"Before that? I wung it. We went by the seat of our pants," said Karen Rose, vice president of marketing.

Since then, the association has helped with an employee handbook and advice on compliance with state wage-and-hour laws and occupational safety rules. Costs have been cut by almost 2 percent.

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