

SPECIAL REPORT: HEALTH CARE

# New CEO plans to simplify health care

## CEO JAJA OKIGWE HAS BIG GROWTH PLANS FOR FIRST CHOICE HEALTH

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Jaja Okigwe joined Seattle-based First Choice Health in May to help the health benefits administration

company through its next phase of growth.

First Choice, which has 200 employees and roughly \$30 million in revenue, negotiates prices for services at doctor offices and hospitals, pays claims, administers ID cards and handles customer service for its members, including the city of Kirkland and the Polyclinic.

With two new hires already under his belt, here is what Okigwe has in mind moving forward.

**What is your growth strategy as you take on this new role?** First Choice in some ways is like two different companies. It is a 30-year-old established organization and a startup at the same time. So growth is twofold, too. For the traditional organization, I've been told by many a consultant that we are the best-kept secret in the area. But I don't want to be a secret. That is partly why we've talked a lot about promoting what we do and being a lot less quiet about what we do.

**And what is the second piece?** The other part is actually doing some new things that we hadn't thought about before. A number of people inside the organization have been putting together analyses and doing



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First Choice Health President and CEO Jaja Okigwe joined the health benefits administration company in May after more than 12 years at Premera Blue Cross.

one-off presentations for some of our customers and I think some of that can be turned into products and may be sellable.

**Can you give me an example?** When it comes to the opioid epidemic, employers are trying to ask themselves, "Do I have a problem?" So, people here put together a way of analyzing pharmacy and medical information to provide to an employer some options for their employees. We try to pull as much of the medical record together as possible and then

provide some options, all while ensuring confidentiality.

**How do you keep it confidential while still providing actionable information?** Right now we share information with employers not using names, but at a number level. Say an employer has 3,000 people and 100 who it should really be worried about. We give them those numbers and go a step further to talk about options. This has been going on for a while inside First Choice, but people never thought that organizations would pay for it, so

that is sort of the startup aspect I was talking about. We're taking this great insight and getting it to market so we can create greater value.

**Any more hiring on the horizon?** Not immediately, but eventually we will seek some new roles as we start to emphasize new things, like how we use data.

**What is your goal for revenue growth moving forward?** We hope to see a double-digit growth rate per year.

**With all the changes happening in health care, where do you see First Choice fitting in?** If anything, health care is getting more complex. I would like to see us as a simplifier. We sit in the middle of a whole bunch of different audiences. If we can better communicate with employers, simplify how individuals access their benefits and where they need to go and what information they have, and then communicate with providers, then I think we are doing a wonderful service.

**What do you think about companies like Amazon getting into the space?** It is part of a signal that employers really are facing a tough job in providing benefits to their employees. Employee health care is a really big expense. It just signals that they are saying, "Enough is enough. If you don't figure it out, we're going to step in." It is becoming critical to our business to understand what is going on.

**What is something people would be surprised to know about you?** I speak three languages: French, Spanish and English.

**What is your leadership style?** I like to work in teams. I think better with groups of people and I get really excited and a lot of energy from them.