

benefits

The measure now goes to the Senate.

now go without, raising the total for the program overall to 10 million kids. The \$35 billion cost

lier bill, not withstanding supposed improvements in policy," it said.

Got errands? Go to work

Companies add concierge services to retain staff

MIAMI (AP) — Memorial Healthcare System's employees can get an oil change and their clothes dry cleaned without leaving work. General Mills workers can skip traffic and long lines when they mail packages or get jewelry repaired. And Ernst & Young staffers need only pick up a phone to have someone plan their vacation or research nursing homes for an elderly parent.

These workplaces are part of a growing number that are embellishing their benefits packages with "concierge services" — everything from flower deliveries and car detailing to restaurant reservations and clothes alterations.

Perhaps no company pampers its employees as much as Internet search leader Google Inc. The Mountain View, Calif.-based company offers a diverse menu of perquisites that include three free meals a day, plus other on-site conveniences like car washes, oil changes, massages, haircuts, dry cleaning, child care and medical care. The employees have to pay for some services while Google subsidizes others.

About 5 percent of the nation's companies, according

to one survey, have hired personal assistance firms to handle at least some services for their workers. The employer pays the concierge's fee, while staffers pay the cost of the wash or tick-

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Wayne Wallace,
Career Resource Center
director at U. of Florida

Perks like this cropped up during the high-tech heyday in the 1990s, when companies were competing for the same talent, but dwindled when that bubble burst. Now these benefits are more commonly seen at Fortune 500 companies and places that angle for the "employer of choice" label.

"It helps the employee not to have to burn up all their personal time doing all these chores," said Wayne Wallace, director of the Career Resource Center at the University of Florida. And while Wallace doesn't dispute

that many people wouldn't mind a bump in their paycheck, "it isn't all about the money," he said. "The extras are nice."

At Memorial Healthcare, the concierge service has helped admissions director Jean Romano-Clark, who has been a frequent user of the perk ever since the Hollywood, Fla., hospital introduced it this spring. Memorial Healthcare Systems, which employs more than 10,500 people, pays \$399,500 annually for the service. Chicago-based Errand Solutions runs the benefit for them.

Romano-Clark uses it to get her Honda Pilot scrubbed — she leaves it at a designated parking space in the hospital garage and finds it gleaming at the end of the day. She goes to the service's onsite office to buy gift cards, develop photos and even get a watch fixed — leaving more time to spend with her 11-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son.

"Instead of doing all of (those errands) on Saturday, I can go with them to a football game or soccer game," Romano-Clark said. "It's hard to balance work and children, and this has helped put balance back."

Errand Solutions founder and CEO Marsha McVicker said she started her company "because I wanted somebody to do my errands... I didn't want to spend my time in line at the Jiffy Lube."

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