

BUSINESS & TECH

Longtime Insurance and Benefits Execs Launch Firm Aiding San Antonio Businesses



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COURTESY

(From left) Pete Villemain and Buddy Morris

A decade ago, Summit Insurance Group was the largest employee benefits firm in San Antonio. Its founder, San Antonio native Buddy Morris, sold the 11-year old company to global firm Arthur J. Gallagher & Co. in 2008 and remained on as area president.

Now, more than 10 years later, Morris has left Gallagher to launch a new venture called Spire Risk Management, an insurance consulting firm specializing in employee benefits. Spire made its first acquisition on Nov. 1, local firm Employee Benefits Services Inc. (EBS).

For Morris, the move marks a "full circle" in his career, he told the *Rivard Report* on Wednesday.

While with Gallagher, Morris worked to match large companies with health insurance and benefit options for hundreds or thousands of employees. Those who follow local business, City Hall, and public safety issues might recognize Morris as the City's consultant for its most recent negotiations with police and fire unions.

"After 10 years of Gallagher, I saw a need in the marketplace for being able to combine national, big firm talent with small, boutique firm service levels," Morris said. The goal is to connect smaller businesses to the same high-quality health care benefit providers and packages that larger employers have access to.

About 85 percent of employers in San Antonio have fewer than 50 employees, he said.

Spire, which kept on the staff of EBS, hasn't yet found a headquarters for its 12 employees, Morris said, but they're looking in the Loop 410/Interstate 10 area on the North Side with space to grow.

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Spire's business model does not include downsizing the companies it acquires, he said. Instead, he plans to increase their staffs.

Morris serves as Spire's chair. Pete Villemain, who served as president of EBS since 2004, will serve as president of employee benefits for Spire. Villemain's parents, Art and Billie, founded EBS in 1986.

Two days after he graduated from college in 1995, Villemain started working for EBS. His father told him: "That was enough vacation. Now get to work," he quipped.

EBS has made large investments in its consumer-facing technology, Villemain said, making it easy for small businesses – who are strapped for time and resources – to onboard employees, adjust benefits, and more.

"The clients we focus on might not have a [human resources] person, maybe don't have a benefits person" dedicated to finding the employees and the company the best deal, he said. Spire and companies like it become a "benefits arm of a company."

Spire aims to serve companies that have anywhere from two to 1,000 employees.

Villemain said he expects Morris' new company will one day become one of the largest of its kind in San Antonio. "I don't think we would have done this deal if I didn't think that was a real possibility."

In the meantime, Morris will continue his consultant work for the City as it negotiates a contract with the fire union through binding mediation sessions.

Disclosure: Buddy Morris is a contributing member of the Rivard Report. For a full list of supporters, click [here](https://therivardreport.com/membership/leadership-circle/) (<https://therivardreport.com/membership/leadership-circle/>).

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