

U.S. Sen. Baldwin, Senators: Urge Trump Administration to re-open Affordable Care Act enrollment

Posted on Friday, Mar 13, 2020

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - In light of the ongoing outbreak of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and in an effort to ensure more Americans have access to affordable health care, U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and 24 other Senators are urging the Trump administration to open a special enrollment period to allow people without health insurance to purchase an ACA plan through the health insurance marketplaces.

Currently, about 27.5 million Americans lack health insurance of any kind, and even more are underinsured or have so-called “junk plans,” which could still leave them facing expensive medical bills if hospitalized for treatment for COVID-19 or other health issues. Allowing people to purchase a plan now through the Affordable Care Act (ACA) could help individuals seek affordable testing and treatment while improving public health.

*“We are deeply concerned that individuals and families will be forced to choose between getting tested and seeking care for COVID-19 to protect themselves, their families, and communities from further spread and being left with thousands of dollars in bills that they are unable to pay. In addition, when the uninsured or underinsured are unable to pay their medical bills, it is health care providers who are left to make up the shortfall. Health care providers are already relying on emergency resources to pay for increased capacity and medical supplies in order to be prepared for further spread of COVID-19,” **the Senators wrote.** “As such, and given the ongoing unprecedented public health crisis, we ask that HHS and CMS work to establish special enrollment periods for anyone seeking individual or family coverage through the health exchanges.”*

This past year, 8.3 million people purchased or re-enrolled in Affordable Care Act health plans using the HealthCare.gov platform during the 2020 open enrollment period, which the Trump administration closed on December 15, 2019.

The Senators, led by Senator Jack Reed (D-RI), are asking the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to establish special enrollment periods for anyone seeking individual or family coverage through the health exchanges: *“Having comprehensive, affordable coverage is essential to ensure the health and well-being of the American people, particularly given the lack of access to testing for the COVID-19 and the uncertain trajectory of the outbreak. It is imperative for patients to receive covered care, regardless of whether they test positive or negative for the virus. Patients should not feel the need to avoid care out of fear of incurring medical bills they cannot afford,”* **the Senators wrote.**

A total of 25 U.S. Senators signed the letter to HHS Secretary Azar and CMS Administrator Verma. In addition to Senators Baldwin and Reed, the letter is signed by Senators Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Chris Murphy (D-CT), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Bob Casey (D-PA), Ron Wyden (D-OR), Tom Udall (D-NM), Maggie Hassan (D-NH), Tom Carper (D-DE), Jon Tester (D-MT), Patty Murray (D-WA), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Gary Peters (D-MI), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Chris Coons (D-DE), Angus King (I-ME), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) and Bob Menendez (D-NJ)

The full text of the letter is available below and [here](#). An online version of this release is available [here](#).

March 12, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar

Secretary

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

200 Independence Avenue, SW

Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Seema Verma

Administrator

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

7500 Security Blvd.

Baltimore, MD 21244

Dear Secretary Azar and Administrator Verma:

In light of the ongoing outbreak of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in the United States, we write to express our concern regarding the increasing rates of individuals and families who are uninsured or underinsured. We ask that the Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services allow individuals who are at-risk for COVID-19 to access affordable health care options through the health insurance marketplaces with a special enrollment period. We must do everything in our power to improve access to health care at a time when we are encouraging people who may have been exposed to COVID-19 to come forward, get tested, and seek treatment to help prevent further spread of the disease.

As you know, the U.S. Census Bureau released new data in November 2019 showing that the uninsured rate increased from 7.9 percent in 2017 to 8.5 percent in 2018. This amounts to nearly 2 million more people, bringing the total to 27.5 million uninsured Americans. Many more people likely have insufficient insurance coverage through short-term limited duration insurance or “junk” plans, which could

still leave someone facing expensive medical bills if hospitalized for treatment for COVID-19 or seasonal flu.

We are deeply concerned that individuals and families will be forced to choose between getting tested and seeking care for COVID-19 to protect themselves, their families, and communities from further spread and being left with thousands of dollars in bills that they are unable to pay. In addition, when the uninsured or underinsured are unable to pay their medical bills, it is health care providers who are left to make up the shortfall. Health care providers are already relying on emergency resources to pay for increased capacity and medical supplies in order to be prepared for further spread of COVID-19.

As such, and given the ongoing unprecedented public health crisis, we ask that HHS and CMS work to establish special enrollment periods for anyone seeking individual or family coverage through the health exchanges. Having comprehensive, affordable coverage is essential to ensure the health and well-being of the American people, particularly given the lack of access to testing for the COVID-19 and the uncertain trajectory of the outbreak. It is imperative for patients to receive covered care, regardless of whether they test positive or negative for the virus. Patients should not feel the need to avoid care out of fear of incurring medical bills they cannot afford.

Patients must have access to affordable health insurance that will cover needed health care services for testing and treatment, especially now, when the broader public health is at risk. While there are many unknowns about how this outbreak will progress in the United States, we can certainly all agree that increasing the rate of insurance coverage will be critical to managing this outbreak and the expenses associated with increased need for health care services, such as costly hospitalizations. Thank you for your attention to this critical issue and we look forward to your response.