

Oregonians may face sticker shock when buying health insurance

By LYNNE TERRY

Oregon Capital Chronicle

SALEM — More than 300,000 Oregonians who buy health insurance for themselves or through a small group plan are likely to see a spike in premiums next year.

The health insurance companies that offer plans on the individual marketplace and those that offer group plans are seeking average rate increases approaching 7%, according to the state Department of Consumer and Business Services, which regulates health insurers.

In the individual market, the requested rate increases for 2023 range from 2.3% to 12.6%, with a weighted average increase of 6.7%, the department said. That means a 40-year-old with a mid-range plan could pay as much as \$507 a month if the rates are approved.

In the small group market, the nine companies offering plans asked for increases from 0% to 11.6%, or as much as \$446 a month for premiums, the department said.



Department of Consumer and Business Services/Contributed Photo
Katie Button of the Department of Consumer and Business Services, right, helps a consumer pick a health care plan on the federal online marketplace.

In comparison, the cost of plans in effect this year barely budged from 2021, going up by a weighted average of about 1.5% in the individual and group markets.

The insurers said inflation, a rise in medical costs and changes in enrollment necessitated the increases, according to the department.

Health care costs in the United States, which spends a larger share of its gross domestic product on health care than any other industrialized country, rose nearly 5% in 2019, nearly 10% in 2020 and nearly 7% last year.

The state is trying to curb increases and has a goal of a

yearly rise up to 3.4%. That ceiling is in effect for Medicaid and state-paid health insurance plans, but it is not mandatory for commercial insurers.

The department has two months to review and approve rates for 2023. The public will be able to comment online later this month about them.

The public comment period starts later this month and runs to July 7 online. There will be public hearings online on July 27 and 28. Go to oregonhealthrates.org for information.

Besides potential rate hikes, consumers will be hit with lower subsidies: Boosted subsidies from the federal government in place for 2021 and this year will end at the beginning of 2023. They have cut premiums by an average of 46%. That enabled people who earned between \$13,590 and \$27,180 a year to buy a low-end plan for \$1 a month.

The department said it could be worse. Without the state's reinsurance plan, which uses federal money to reduce premium costs,

the rates would increase another 6%. Insurance Commissioner Andrew Stolfi said the program has kept premiums reasonable and given Oregonians choice.

"Oregon continues to have a strong and competitive insurance marketplace, with four carriers offering plans statewide and Oregonians in most (of) our counties having five or six companies to choose from," Stolfi said in a statement.

Stolfi encouraged consumers to comment on the plans and prices and participate in virtual hearings on July 27 and 28. During the hearings, each insurer will give a presentation about its rate requests, answer questions from the department and listen to the public.

"We look forward to a thorough public review of these filings as we work to establish next year's health insurance rates," Stolfi said.

The department will make a preliminary rate decision in early July, with a final decision in early August.

Top corrections leaders offer unflattering take on governor, lawmakers

By NOELLE CROMBIE

The Oregonian

SALEM — When leaders of the Oregon Department of Corrections met last fall with a \$325-an-hour consultant to plan the agency's future, they rattled off challenges they faced.

Among them: a "dysfunctional" governor's office and Legislature.

Their take on state lawmakers was particularly blunt: "Uninformed but believe they are informed."

The withering assessments were included in a 25-page internal document prepared by the consultant and obtained by The Oregonian/OregonLive.

It was Colette S. Peters, the longtime corrections head, who offered the unflattering assessment of Gov. Kate Brown's



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian, File
Colette S. Peters, director of the Oregon Department of Corrections, speaks to a gathering of EOIC employees and members of the public Wednesday, Oct. 2, 2019, at the prison's new wellness facility. Peters offered an unflattering assessment of Gov. Kate Brown's office during an Oregon Department of Corrections meeting, according to multiple sources with direct knowledge of the gathering. Peters answers to Brown as a department director.

office during the meeting and documented in the report, according to multiple sources with direct knowledge of the gathering. Peters answers to Brown as

a department director. The perception of lawmakers as uninformed came from several people in the room, said the sources, who were not authorized

to speak publicly about the meeting.

Rep. Janelle Bynum, D-Happy Valley, who this year pressed Peters in a hearing on the department's discipline of a prisoner, called the criticism "unfair."

"I think most legislators would say we all want to be informed," she said. "I think the general feeling is we can't possibly be informed coming from our individual communities as agencies probably want us to be or think we should be. It's a citizen legislature."

Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, D-Beaverton, said her fellow lawmakers work hard.

"Do we know every in and out of the Department



Brown



Bynum

of Corrections? Probably not," she said. "But I think people are acting in good faith."

A spokesperson for Brown did not respond to a request for comment Wednesday, May 25.

Shifting focus

The document reflects an agency grappling with its role amid shifting societal priorities regarding crime and punishment and a national focus on racial disparities embedded in the American criminal justice system.

The meeting, facilitated by Beth Doolittle, who works as an organizational consultant, was intended to help the agency plan its long-range future. The agency released its contract

with Doolittle in response to a public records request. It shows the agency agreed to pay her up to \$150,000 for consulting services.

During the meeting last fall, agency leaders cited multiple demographic, practical and political factors that shape their work.

They listed the state's aging prison population, "far left" and "far right" political forces and a shift regarding "who's the victim?"

"Focus has shifted to the trauma/harm," to the person who is incarcerated instead of the crime victim, the report notes.

They also cited the department's shifting relationships with outside advocacy groups urging systemic changes within Oregon's prisons, such as a reexamination of the use of solitary confinement.

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