

Rates

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ment levels.”

This will be the fifth year that Regence Blue Cross Blue Shield has increased rates by double digits. Every year since 2007, the non-profit health insurance company increased rates by 17 percent, 24 percent, 17 percent and 16 percent, respectively.

According to Regence spokesperson Scott Burton, the company is doing it all it can to contain costs.

“Health care costs for our individual pool are increasing, while the number of people sharing the burden of those costs is shrinking,” according to Regence. “As a result, rates continue to rise. The rates we have requested in this filing are a direct reflection of these costs.”

The Oregon Insurance Division – which operates out of the Division of Consumer and Business Services — does take into account the effect a premium increase will have on consumers, although they rarely deny a rate increase request outright. More often, according to the agency, a rate request will be reduced, from, say, 22 percent to 15 percent.

Most recently, the division downgraded a request by the for-profit company HealthNet of Oregon.

Last year, the division reduced rate requests in about half of all cases, on average by about 4 percent. Changes in state law that went into effect in April 2010 now allow the division to take into account a company’s overall profitability when determining whether a rate increase would be appropriate.

“The division has new tools available and we are using them to carefully scrutinize each and every rate filing to achieve the maximum savings for consumers,” said Teresa Miller, Insurance Division administrator in a statement. “Having said that, rates must still cover medical claims, which continue to increase and make insurance

that much harder for individual and small businesses to afford.”

Take the case of Regence, a non-profit health insurer, like many of the large health insurers in the state. According to the company’s filing, they are now operating at a 2.1 percent loss. If the rate increase goes through, they would operate at a 1.1 percent profit. Claims costs would change from 80.3 percent to 79.2 percent. Much of the increase in costs, according to Regence’s filing, comes from increased medical and prescription costs.

“We share our members concern about rising health care costs,” Regence officials told The Skanner News in response to emailed ques-

tions. “Premium increases are difficult for the entire community, but especially those members who must bear the cost of individual policies. At Regence we are focused on increasing efficiency, reducing administrative costs and holding true to our nonprofit mission as part of a larger strategy to reduce costs to members.”

Since OSPIRG began its Health Insurance Rate Watch project in the fall of 2010, they’ve looked exclusively at rate increases that fall under the purview of the Insurance Division – those policies affecting small employers and individual plans.

“In each of those cases, we didn’t find that the rate increase has been adequately justified,” Etherton said. “Sometimes it’s a matter of missing information or the information provided not making the case adequately. So far the insurance division has agreed with us and pushed back on the insurer and gotten more information, and in two cases reduced the rate quite significantly. That said, these rate increases are still really high and we need to ensure that Oregon regulators are doing whatever they can to protect the public.”

It’s unclear how a system of mandatory

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Deputy Chief Ferraris



PHOTO COURTESY OF SALEM POLICE DEPARTMENT

Deputy Police Chief James Ferraris of the Salem Police Department was sworn in by Chief Jerry Moore in a ceremony held in the Salem City Council Chambers on Monday morning. Deputy Police Chief Ferraris has been in law enforcement for over 32 years, most recently as the Commander of the North Precinct of the Portland Police Bureau. “We are very happy to add a person of Jim’s qualifications and character to our family, and we’re looking forward to benefiting from his leadership and experience,” Moore said.

public meetings and hearings would change the way health insurance companies file for rate increases.

Regence welcomes the change.

“The regulatory and political process around rates, as well as the economy of health care in general, is complicated,” according to Regence. “As a result, Regence remains dedicated to transparency throughout our filing process. We encourage the public and our members to ask questions and learn about how rates are set, and what we are doing at Regence to address the challenge of affordability for everyone.”

OSPIRG also supports a more robust public involvement in the rate process.

“It’s absolutely critical for the public to turn out to the public hearing and have their voices heard on what rate increases like this one mean for their families, for the affordability of health care,” Etherton said. “Are they going to have to buy down the rates, get a bigger deductible ... what kind of

impact will that have on family finances? I think it’s really important for the insurance division to hear very specifically what the impact will be, so they can make a determination.”

Currently Senate Bill 717 is moving its way through the Oregon Senate and is currently assigned to the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Transportation and Economic Development. To read a complete filing of Regence Blue Cross Blue Shield of Oregon’s rate request, visit <http://insurance.oregon.gov/> and click on the FAQ’s of Regence’s Rate Request link.

To see a breakdown of all proposed, disapproved and approved rate increases visit the Insurance Division’s filings pages at http://www4.cbs.state.or.us/ex/ins/filing/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.show_filings

News

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source in referring readers to quality local reporting done by other folks as well.”

The project places a ‘hub’ page on the Oregonian’s website, Oregonlive.com, with links to the partner websites.

In addition, where Oregonian staff may cover specific issue relating to its media partners, OregonLive will post links to related stories on its partner media websites.

“The idea is when you come to OregonLive you’re going to find quality, whether we’re doing it or whether we’re pointing you to someone else.”

Media partners are: BikePortland, one of the region’s most successful topic blogs; The Lund Report, an award-winning health-care watchdog site; Oregon Capitol News, the Cascade Policy Institute’s independent reporting project; The Skanner News, one of oldest African-American-owned publications in the state; and the geographic niche sites Neighborhood Notes, Clark County Blog, MyEugene, North Coast Oregon and The Yaquina Wavelength.

The pilot phase of the program is funded in part by a one-year grant from American University’s J-Lab Institute for Interactive Journalism.

“The pilot partners represent a cross section of folks who typify the kind of new online reporting that’s changing traditional definitions of news,” Swart says. “This is a unique opportunity to see if we can create a cooperative model that will help us all to flourish.”

He says getting new and old media to

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work together is not without its challenges.

“Many of these sites could be considered competitors, some are advocates for their communities, others don’t easily fit the traditional definition of journalism,” said JoLene Krawczak, The Oregonian Managing Editor for Features and Communities. “But that’s really the whole point.

“The digital age has changed how and from whom people get their news,” she says.

“This program tries to stretch how the newspaper and the website deliver the news by offering different voices from our news partners.”

Krawczak said that as part of a willing-

ness to work with non-traditional news makers, the ONN will offer training and workshops to partners aimed at connecting with the professional resources of The Oregonian and helping to pass along the trusted values, skills and traditions of classic newsroom journalism.

“The benefits of the ONN partnerships are

already being realized,” said Lynnette Fussilier of Neighborhood Notes, which covers all 95 Portland neighborhoods. Over the last two weeks, story excerpts and links to their stories have been posted on OregonLive. “The Oregonian team has graciously shared their expertise in copyright matters, connected us with freelance reporters, and even helped us with research. We anticipated that connecting with the Oregonian would be difficult due to the size of the organization, but this hasn’t been the case at all.”

Working with new media reporters as peers is part of what makes the ONN partnership more than just a set of weblinks.

“The exciting thing is that we all get to learn from each other,” Swart says. “The Oregonian can teach classic journalism, but on other things, like how to navigate the new online news environment, our partners might have a lot they can teach us.

“We’re hoping that in the long run, the partners and The Oregonian can all learn to work, and evolve together.”

Find ONN Partner story links posted daily throughout Oregonlive, or go to the ONN page to learn more.