

AP Photo/Andrew Harnik, File

The HealthCare.gov website, where people can buy health insurance, is displayed on a laptop screen in Washington.

Double-digit premium hikes coming to Obamacare in 2017

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Premiums will go up sharply next year under President Barack Obama's health care law, and many consumers will be down to just one insurer, the administration confirmed Monday. That's sure to stoke another "Obamacare" controversy days before a presidential election.

Before taxpayer-provided subsidies, premiums for a midlevel benchmark plan will increase an average of 25 percent across the 39 states served by the federally run online market, according to a report from the Department of Health and Human Services. Some states will see much bigger jumps, others less.

Moreover, about 1 in 5 consumers will only have plans from a single insurer to pick from, after major national carriers such as UnitedHealth Group, Humana and Aetna scaled back their roles.

"Consumers will be faced this year with not only big premium increases but also with a declining number of insurers participating, and that will lead to a tumultuous open enrollment period," said Larry Levitt, who tracks the health care law for the nonpartisan Kaiser Family

Foundation.

Republicans pounced on the numbers as a warning that insurance markets created by the 2010 health overhaul are teetering toward a "death spiral." Sign-up season starts Nov. 1, about a week before national elections in which the GOP remains committed to a full repeal.

"It's over for Obamacare," Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump said at a campaign rally Monday evening in Tampa, Florida.

Trump said his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton, "wants to double down and make it more expensive and it's not gonna work. ... Our country can't afford it, you can't afford it." He promised his own plan would deliver "great health care at a fraction of the cost."

The new numbers aren't too surprising, said Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, who chairs a committee that oversees the law. It "does little to dispel the notion we are seeing the law implode at the expense of middle-class families."

HHS essentially confirmed state-by-state reports that have been coming in for months. Window shopping for plans and premiums is already available through HealthCare.gov.

Administration officials are stressing that subsidies provided under the law,

which are designed to rise alongside premiums, will insulate most customers from sticker shock. They add that consumers who are willing to switch to cheaper plans will still be able to find bargains.

"Headline rates are generally rising faster than in previous years," acknowledged HHS spokesman Kevin Griffis. But he added that for most consumers, "headline rates are not what they pay."

The vast majority of the more than 10 million customers who purchase through HealthCare.gov and its state-run counterparts do receive generous financial assistance. "Enrollment is concentrated among very low-income individuals who receive significant government subsidies to reduce premiums and cost-sharing," said Caroline Pearson of the consulting firm Avalere Health.

But an estimated 5 million to 7 million people are either not eligible for the income-based assistance, or they buy individual policies outside of the health law's markets, where the subsidies are not available. The administration is urging the latter group to check out HealthCare.gov. The spike in premiums generally does not affect the employer-provided plans that cover most workers and their families.

Guard seeks federal aid for soldiers told to return enlistment bonuses

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Members of Congress and veterans leaders on Monday called for federal action to absolve the debts of nearly 10,000 soldiers in California alone who have been ordered by the Pentagon to repay enlistment bonuses a decade after they signed up to serve in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Lawmakers from California expressed outrage, including Democratic Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer; House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, a Republican; and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat.

Maj. Gen. Matthew Beevers said the California National Guard is working with members of Congress

to introduce legislation that, if approved and signed by the president, would order the National Guard Bureau to clear the debts of soldiers who were wrongly told they were eligible for bonuses of \$15,000 or more.

The total amount given out in bonuses is not clear, but The Los Angeles Times reported \$22 million has been recovered in California so far.

"This is how you destroy all faith in a Pentagon that is supposed to have your back," Brian Duffy, head of the national service organization Veterans of Foreign Wars, said in an emailed statement. "Instead of seeking repayment, the Pentagon owes them a debt of thanks and an apology

for insulting their honorable service to our nation."

The Guard offered the bonuses and student loan aid to re-enlist at the height of the two wars in the 2000s.

The Pentagon demanded the money back after audits revealed overpayments by the California Guard under pressure to fill ranks and hit enlistment goals. If soldiers refuse, they could face interest charges, wage garnishments and tax liens, the Times reported.

"We understand other states may have been affected but are pending verification of which ones," National Guard Bureau spokeswoman Laura Ochoa wrote in an email to The Associated Press. "California is where the majority of this occurred."

CAMPAIGN ROUNDUP

In emails, Clinton campaign measures diversity of staff

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senior staff members on Hillary Clinton's nascent campaign were conscious about diversity in the top ranks two months before the Democratic presidential candidate formally announced her bid, according to hacked emails from the personal account of a top campaign official.

In February 2015, Clinton lawyer and chief of staff Cheryl Mills sent a list of potential hires to campaign chairman John Podesta. Among the suggestions was "Political Director-Hispanic Woman." They eventually hired Amanda Renteria, who is Latina.

Mills sends "Robby's List of the top 10 or so positions," referring to Clinton campaign manager Robby Mook.

The email breaks it down: "four 'POC,' or people of color, four women 'assuming COO is a white woman' and six white men." So, the email says, that is "33% diverse, 33% women, 50% white men."

The email was among more than 3,000 released by the anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks on Monday and is just one of the tens of thousands posted over the last two weeks. The notes were stolen from the email account of Podesta as part of a series of high-profile computer hacks of Democratic targets that U.S. intelligence officials say were orchestrated by Russia, with the intent to influence the Nov. 8 election. Russia has denied the allegations.

Trump rejects 'phony' polls, insists 'we are winning'

ST. AUGUSTINE, Fla. (AP) — A defiant Donald Trump blamed his campaign struggles on "phony polls" from the "disgusting" media on Monday, fighting to energize his most loyal supporters as his path to the presidency shrinks.

With just 14 days until the election, the Republican nominee campaigned in battleground Florida as his team conceded publicly as well as privately that crucial Pennsylvania may be slipping away to Democrat Hillary Clinton. That would leave him only a razor-thin pathway to the 270 electoral votes needed to win.

Despite continued difficulties with women and minorities, Trump refuses to soften his message in the campaign's final days to broaden his coalition. Yet he offered an optimistic front in the midst of a three-day tour through Florida as thousands began voting there in person.

"I believe we're actually winning," Trump declared during a round table discussion with farmers gathered next to a local pumpkin patch.

A day after suggesting the First Amendment to the Constitution may give journalists too much freedom, he insisted that the media are promoting biased polls to discourage his supporters from voting.

60s civil rights hero stands by Trump despite criticism

HIGH POINT, N.C. (AP) — Clarence Henderson was hailed as a hero nearly 60 years ago when as a young black man he participated in a sit-in at a segregated North Carolina lunch counter.

In 2016, he is again taking a risky stand; he is supporting Donald Trump. And he isn't shy about it. Last month he gave the invocation at a Trump rally here, smiling as he shook the Republican candidate's hand.

"Donald Trump is certainly not a politician, and politicians are a dime a dozen, but leaders are priceless," Henderson said in an interview.

Trump is deeply unpopular in the black community. He has called on black voters to vote for him because "what the hell do you have to lose?" His support among blacks is less than the margin of error in some polls.

Henderson, 74, has been criticized for his stance, with many taking to Twitter to accuse him of abandoning the principles he fought so hard for more than half a century ago.

Henderson shrugged off the criticism, saying he isn't paying any attention to it. And he has gotten some support from one of his fellow activists. Jabreel Khazan was one of the first four protesters to sit down at the Woolworth's lunch counter. And though he supports Hillary Clinton, he said he had no problem with Henderson's choice.

"God bless him and all of those who have a second opinion," said Khazan, whose name was Ezell Blair at the time of the protest. "We should not be a one-minded people."


Trump took \$17M insurance for damage few remember

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Donald Trump says he received a \$17 million insurance payment in 2005 for hurricane damage to Mar-a-Lago, his private club in Palm Beach. But The Associated Press has found little evidence of such large-scale damage.

Two years after a series of storms, the real estate tycoon said he didn't know how much had been spent on repairs, but acknowledged he pocketed some of the money. He transferred funds into his personal accounts, saying that under the terms of his policy "you didn't have to reinvest it."

"Landscaping, roofing, walls, painting, leaks, artwork in the — you know, the great tapestries, tiles, Spanish tiles, the beach, the erosion," he said of the storm damage. "It's still not what it was."

Trump's description of extensive damage does not match the versions of Mar-a-Lago members and even Trump loyalists. In an interview about Mar-a-Lago's history, Trump's longtime former butler, Anthony Senecal, recalled no catastrophic damage. He said Hurricane Wilma, the last of a string of storms which barreled through in 2004 and 2005, flattened trees behind the estate, but the house itself only lost some roof tiles.




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