

Health care signup deadline is Jan. 31

(AP) — The future of the Affordable Care Act is unclear, stirring up financial and medical concerns for many consumers. It leaves some to wonder, What now?

Experts say the best thing to do is to focus on the here and now — including the Jan. 31 deadline to sign up.

About 11.5 million people nationally had signed up for coverage through the ACA's public exchanges as of the end of December. President Donald Trump has vowed to repeal it, but lawmakers have yet to reach an agreement on a replacement.

"What we have seen, certainly following the election but it continues today, is uncertainty," said Jennifer Sullivan, vice president of programs at Enroll America. "The truth is no one knows how the law will fare this

year, the uncertainty is warranted."

The process to repeal or replace the law could take time, but a health emergency could hit at any time. And without insurance, it could be financially disastrous.

So if you don't have health insurance, consider signing up.

The final deadline to access coverage through ACA is Tuesday. If you sign up by then, you'll can get coverage by March for the remainder of 2017 and avoid a tax penalty for being uninsured. If you are in a state that has expanded Medicaid under the law and you qualify for that, you can sign up at any time.

Special enrollment periods are still available after the deadline, which allows people to adjust coverage if

they are going through life-changing circumstances such as marriage, divorce, loss of a job or the birth of a child.

"It's still the law, so it's in your best interest to have insurance," said Elizabeth Colvin, program director for Insure Central Texas. "People think something has happened, but the Affordable Care Act is still the law."

Colvin said all signs suggest a lengthy transition. Though people may worry that their coverage may be yanked away, she notes that these health insurance policies are legal contracts that guarantee coverage for the year and are unlikely to be challenged.

So should you bother to enroll? Absolutely. Visit healthcare.gov to find out how to sign up and where to get help.

SAGE: Cost \$8.2 million to build

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Davis said, due to food safety and security regulations. The SAGE Center is a way for them to better understand how farm and energy technology works.

"I think it's fascinating for people to learn how far things have come over the last hundred years," Davis said.

The SAGE Center operates with the backing and support of the Port of Morrow, Oregon's second-largest port, with approximately 50 businesses generating more than \$100 million in tax revenue for the state.

Gary Neal, general manager at the port, initially wanted to create a museum in 2001 after Tillamook Cheese opened a new cheese-making plant in Boardman but did not include a visitor center like the one it has in Tillamook.

Instead, Neal thought the port could shine a spotlight on all the natural resource-based industries it serves, from making cheese and potato chips to electricity and ethanol.

"These are some of the most sophisticated operations in the world here," Neal said. "We need to tell that story."

Early designs for the SAGE Center called for a 10,000-square-foot box-shaped building, though the final building would be three times as large with a silo-themed exterior, movie theater and additional conference space.

The SAGE Center opened June 1, 2013, and cost \$8.2 million to build. Roughly \$3.7 million in funding came

from the state grant \$4.5 million from by the port.

"We think it's a first-class facility," Neal said. "We're pretty proud of it."

Over the last three fiscal years, Neal said the port has continued to cover between \$400,000 and \$600,000 per year in operating costs at the center. However, with a \$40 million capital budget, he said the port is happy to continue supporting the center.

"We didn't get into this lightly," Neal said. "It's not a routine thing that we do, but it's something important that we felt we needed to do."

Neal said the SAGE Center was never intended to be a self-supporting facility. Education, not money, is the goal, and he feels they are doing a good job at the center.

Others at the port and around the region agree.

Debbie Radie, vice president of operations for Boardman Foods — an onion processor that employs 175 people — said many of their customers have a specific interest in sustainable farming and energy efficiency.

The SAGE Center is a place where Radie said she can bring customers to learn about how those farming practices work.

"Sometimes people are misinformed and not understanding how sustainable the water use is here," Radie said. "I think the SAGE Center showcases that well."

Radie said employees at Boardman Foods also appreciate being able to bring their kids and families to the SAGE Center for movie

nights or activities.

"That just helps support a way of life that people enjoy," she said.

James Bradshaw, director of the energy systems technology program at Walla Walla Community College, said he brings 30-40 students every year to the Agriculture and Energy Job Fair, where they can network with about 30 different potential employers.

"The Boardman area has a lot of opportunities for our students to get jobs," Bradshaw said. "There's just a lot of synergy going on in Boardman with agriculture and energy, and with what we're trying to train our students here in Walla Walla."

Neal said the SAGE Center may also help local high schoolers stay in the region after school, knowing they have family-wage jobs in their own back yard. That will only improve, he said, with the completion of the Blue Mountain Community College Workforce Training Center next winter, just across from the SAGE Center.

"We look at this as long-term messaging," Neal said.

Gaining visitors will require constant effort, but after organizing 168 events at the SAGE Center a year ago, Davis said there is plenty of potential to bring people into the region.

"I think the SAGE Center is a great starting point for that," Davis said.

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STANDOFF: Abernathy told police three times he was prepared to leave the room and surrender

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be heard handling a gun and threatening to shoot.

A negotiator was able to calm Abernathy down and eventually granted his request to talk to police on the landline while simultaneously calling family members and friends on the cell phone.

Roberts said the ensuing hours were spent listening to Abernathy talk with his family on speaker phone as they urged him against

hurting anyone or himself.

Although conversations with some of the non-family members he called would sometimes agitate him, he told police three times that he was prepared to leave the room and surrender, even going as far as to request that he be allowed to smoke one last cigarette before being taken away.

Although authorities were optimistic they could detain him peacefully, Abernathy never left the room.

A few minutes after 8 p.m., the negotiator heard the sound of a muffled shot.

Police used a detonation cord, an explosive wrapped in a plastic coat that sends out a detonating wave, to blow the door off its hinges. They found Abernathy's body inside, dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Abernathy was 33.

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FUNDS: County created an online grant application to request funds

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and community development. Elfering took the helm of the development department almost two years ago, after the full-time economic development director retired. Elfering said the days of easy handouts are over.

"The *modus operandi* previously before I really stepped in on it was that, by golly, if Athena had a steak fry, call up the county and get some promotion money," he said. "My philosophy was that we needed to grow taxpayers."

Rather than banners, parades and the like, he said, the money should go to projects with lasting value that could lead to jobs or add property to the county tax rolls. The county since mid-2015 provided \$20,000 to expand offices at Oregon State University's Hermiston Agricultural Research & Extension Center, \$5,000 to Athena for a city swimming pool project, and \$10,000 for an exhibit on wheat at Heritage Station Museum, Pendleton.

"We don't want to fritter the money away," Elfering said.

Michelle Kane, a Girl Scouts volunteer helps organize Hermiston's Me and My Prince Ball, said the money they receive from the county helps the event operate. While its not a make-or-break donation, it helps keeps the price down for those who participate.

"Every little bit that we get for our event helps," she said.

The county created an online grant application to request funds, and Elfering set up a committee to review those each quarter. Elfering serves on the committee, along with county planner Tamra Mabbott, county financial director Robert Pahl and Susan Bower, who contracts with the county to provide employee training and development.

"I look at this as investment money. If we invest it right, it will bring a return to the communities and to the county."

— Bill Elfering, Umatilla County commissioner

The county does not inspect or audit projects that it funds, but Elfering said recipients provide updates and report results. The level of detail in those reports varies depending on the project.

The county funded more than \$28,000 in local tourism efforts, including several hundred for radio ads promoting local events and a \$10,000 chunk to Travel Pendleton, the tourism arm of the Pendleton Chamber of Commerce, to advertise the Round-Up City to the hipster set in Seattle and Portland.

Chamber director Gail Nelson said it's difficult to track how well the advertising reached the target audience, but the county funding was beneficial to "moving the needle" when it comes to Pendleton and tourism.

"We think it was good value of their tourism dollars being spent because, I think, you can argue no one else was out there promoting Pendleton," Nelson said.

Smaller communities also have legitimate tourism draws worthy of promotion, she said, such as the Athena Caledonian Games and the Echo car show. Backing only new tourism attempts, Nelson said, would be shortsighted.

She also said she was concerned how the county's shift in economic and community development spending could affect smaller chambers. The Pendleton chamber's size insulates it against losing county sponsorship of the big annual banquet, she said, but smaller chambers could suffer.

"They're the ones that really depend on the county being a sponsor," Nelson

said. The *East Oregonian* tried to reach some of the smaller chambers for comments, including Athena's, but was not able to talk to anyone.

Elfering stressed funding tourism is a county priority "because tourism turns into dollars in the till, and dollars in the till create job."

That's also why, he said, the county is backing the drone range at the airport in Pendleton and the Pendleton Downtown Association. Both received \$10,000 from the county.

But, he said, the grants are not funding a project's total cost nor an organization's operations.

"We can help, that's the key," he said. "We can help, we can't do it all for them."

The county also continues to pump a few thousand economic dollars each year to "bump" prices of youth livestock sales. Elfering said the county will continue that support.

The biggest ask and give since 2015 was \$30,000 for a radar installation at the drone range. That project fell through, and the money is back again in county coffers.

Elfering also said the county is not required to spend all of the state funds each year and is building up a war chest in case a big project needs helps, such as a housing project or an agriculture science facility for large animals at Blue Mountain Community College.

"I look at this as investment money," he said. "If we invest it right, it will bring a return to the communities and to the county."

Contact Phil Wright at pwright@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0833.

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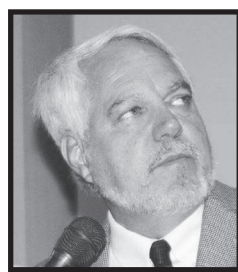
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