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Oregonians Urged to Seek Health Plan Slots

Low-Income Uninsured Stand Good Chance of Help

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PORTLAND, Ore. -- Over the next couple of weeks, uninsured Oregonians with few earnings who take a few minutes to register with the Oregon Health Plan stand a good chance of obtaining free or low-cost health insurance.

The Oregon Department of Human Services, which administers OHP, will randomly draw 20,000 names from the registry on October 20. Those selected will then be invited to apply for health coverage under a program called "OHP Standard."

Because the reservation list currently has only about 12,000 names on it, those who register now have very good odds of having their names drawn, according to Janet Bauer, policy analyst with the Oregon Center for Public Policy.

"It costs nothing and it takes but a few minutes to register. Social service agencies, the faith community and educators should urge everyone who they think is uninsured and may qualify to register for OHP before the October 20 drawing," Bauer said. "You can also add the name of someone you know who you think qualifies."

Last week, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the number of Oregonians lacking insurance increased to 643,000 in 2009, up 50,000 from the prior year.

A combination of a new dedicated hospital tax and federal matching funds have allowed Oregon to expand enrollment in one of its health insurance programs, OHP Standard, to help meet the increased need.

The program provides free or low-cost health coverage to uninsured Oregon adults with income below federal poverty income guidelines (\$18,310 for a family of three) and modest savings.

To enroll in OHP Standard, people must first add their names to the registry, from which DHS randomly draws names on a periodic basis.

There are no eligibility criteria to sign up; anyone can join. Those selected from the list can then apply to determine whether they qualify for OHP Standard. Anyone remaining on the registry list will be included in the next random drawing.

DHS opened the reservation list in October 2009 with the aim of boosting OHP Standard enrollment to 60,000 by June 30, 2011. About 21,000 spots remain available.

"In these tough economic times, the expansion of the Oregon Health Plan is more important than ever," Bauer said. "With the expansion, OHP will still cover fewer than half of what it did during the mid-1990s, but the increase is still something Oregon should be proud of."

Not all of Oregon's uninsured will qualify for OHP Standard, Bauer explained, because it covers only those with the fewest resources to pay for their care. She added that some of Oregon's uninsured may qualify for other programs that do not have waiting lists, such as the Healthy Kids program.

"While many adults must wait for the landmark federal health care law to kick in, those who are struggling the

most today have a chance of getting help now," said Bauer.

Getting on the reservation list is easy, she explained. You can sign up for the reservation list by calling toll-free 1-800-699-9075. At that number you can also find out if you qualify for other health insurance programs. You can also sign up online or by mail.

OCPP has information about how to get on the reservation list on its website, ocpp.org. You can also visit the Department of Human Services website, www.oregon.gov/DHS/open.

The Oregon Center for Public Policy is a non-partisan research institute that does in-depth research and analysis on budget, tax and economic issues. The Center's goal is to improve decision making and generate more opportunities for all Oregonians.

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