Over 90k uninsured sign up for Oregon Health Plan opportunity; 3k to be randomly selected

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

After five weeks, the Oregon Health Plan reservation list attracted the names of 91,675 uninsured Oregonians by the time it closed Friday at midnight. Final numbers were tallied over the weekend. The reservation list for the Health Plan's Standard benefit package, which insures a limited number of low-income adults who don't qualify for traditional Medicaid, had been open for people to sign up since Jan. 28. Within the next few days, a state computer will randomly select the names of 3,000 people who will be mailed applications next week; more applications will be mailed in subsequent months. To be considered for eligibility, individuals must complete and return the applications within 30 days of the date stamped on them. Across Oregon, more than 200 outreach sites -- county health departments, hospitals, tribal health clinics, community health centers and safety-net clinics -- will be available to help people complete applications. "Seeing 91,675 Oregonians sign up just for a chance to apply for health insurance is a reflection of the vigorous demand for medical coverage," said Jim Edge, state Medicaid director in the Oregon Department of Human Services. "And these people represent only a fraction of the nearly 600,000 Oregonians without coverage." Edge said the state estimates 137,000 Oregonians would qualify for Standard coverage. Budget limitations closed the Standard benefit plan to new enrollments in July 2004. The plan was reopened after program enrollment fell below the number the budget can support, which is a monthly average of 24,000 during the two-year budget period. DHS officials consulted with medical, legal, disability and county stakeholders before deciding to use a reservation list from which a computer would randomly draw names; it then won federal approval to use the process, which also addressed needs of individuals with disability, economic or cultural barriers. A robust public awareness campaign supporting the reservation list -- 5,000 posters in English and Spanish, 670,000 brochures in 10 languages, direct mail to 330,000 households and materials to 1,800 community partners -- was the most comprehensive in DHS history. Edge said 15.6 percent of Oregonians were uninsured in 2006, the most recent year for which data are available, compared with 10.7 percent in 1996 when the Oregon Health Plan's Standard benefit package was enrolling five times as many people. Oregon's 2006 rate of individuals without health insurance was below the national rate of 16.6 percent. The highest rate of uninsured Oregonians was 19.1 percent in a region comprising Crook, Deschutes and Jefferson counties, with the lowest rate of 13.5 percent in a regional comprising Grant, Harney, Klamath and Lake counties. The highest rate of Oregonians without health insurance was among adults in their 20s. The Standard plan, with nearly 18,000 people enrolled, covers physician services, prescription drugs, mental health and chemical dependency services, emergency medical services, and limited dental, hospital and vision benefits. If someone who applies for Standard coverage instead qualifies for a different program, Edge said, DHS eligibility workers will notify the individual that he or she has been enrolled in that program. (The separate Plus program, meanwhile, is always open to people who are aged, blind, disabled, pregnant, younger than 19 or receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families benefits. Individuals can request applications by calling 1-800-359-9517.) Meanwhile, the Oregon Health Fund Board, appointed by Gov. Ted Kulongoski in September, is working on proposals to expand affordable, high-quality health care to more Oregonians. The Governor is expected to consider the board's ideas in preparing his recommended budget for the 2009 Oregon Legislature.