

Feb. 5, 2014

County ramps up outreach for end of health insurance marketplace enrollment period

Additional counselors hired to provide in-person assistance

SARASOTA COUNTY — With open enrollment for the Health Insurance Marketplace ending Monday, March 31, Sarasota County has ramped up its efforts to assist the public in getting affordable health insurance. Additional Certified Application Counselors have been hired to provide in-person help as individuals go through the process of applying for and choosing new coverage options in the federal Health Insurance Marketplace.

The counselors are not affiliated with any insurance companies. Their role is to guide and provide unbiased information to help individuals make informed choices about coverage options based on their health care needs.

Because so much of the process is Internet-driven, the counselors have been assisting anyone who requests assistance, including those who do not have access to a computer.

“The team has visited many venues, including local libraries, to assist individuals in understanding health coverage options and guiding them through the enrollment process,” said Ann Hardy, community engagement coordinator for the Sarasota County Library System.

The counselors are gratified by the success stories. Many involve people for whom health insurance was out of reach due to pre-existing health conditions such as diabetes. A 54-year-old woman living with diabetes and ongoing health issues had no insurance for more than a decade. She was able to enroll in a silver-level plan for just \$49 per month. In early January, she was able to use her new insurance plan to get the medical care she needed.

Another involved a woman in her late 20s, who lost her health insurance when her work schedule decreased to part-time. She now has health insurance and is able to pay the shared cost of \$9 for the surgery she needs with a \$150 deductible.

“Although we are mostly interfacing with middle-age adults, we are also equipped to assist those under age 30 who may be waiting to enroll,” said Shawnta Zackery, program coordinator.

They hope to reach this younger age group in upcoming health fair events at State College of Florida (SCF) and at New College of Florida, which will also reach students from the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee (USFSM).

This effort is the result of additional funding that Sarasota County's Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) received from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resource Services Administration (HRSA). FQHR is a private-public partnership between the Community Health Center of North Port Inc. and the Florida Department of Health in Sarasota County,

"Helping people access affordable health insurance is part of a larger local collaborative partnership to help preserve, strengthen and even improve the local health care systems," said Community Health Center of North Port Inc. CEO Linda Stone, Ph.D.

According to local health officials, chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, as well as anxiety and depression, can be effectively managed when individuals have health insurance so they can access affordable primary health care, health promotion and prevention services, case management and other behavioral health services. This ultimately improves health outcomes among those living with complex health concerns while helping to lower health care costs.

"With the help of community partners, we have educated almost 3,000 individuals about affordable coverage options through the Health Insurance Marketplace, Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (Healthy Kids, Florida KidCare, and the Children's Medical Services Network in Florida) as well as other insurance plans on the marketplace," said Stone. "We have capacity to see more people with just over six weeks remaining in the enrollment period, and are looking for additional community partners who may want to assist us.

"We are continually updating our website and adding new outreach activities," said Stone.

For information and the most recent version of the schedule of events, visit www.SarasotaHealthInsuranceMarketplace.com, or call 866-547-2793.

This information is also available for those who do not have access to a computer at touch-screen health kiosks at the William L. Little Health & Human Services Center in Sarasota, Senior Friendship Centers and all local libraries.

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