

Working poor Utah families feel sting of health reform

Health » Ban on federal funding for elective abortions means some Utahns lose help with insurance.

By Kirsten Stewart
The Salt Lake Tribune

Salt Lake Tribune
Updated:

The Salt Lake Tribune

<http://www.sltrib.com>

Last winter was tough for Trista Bunker, who had a miscarriage four weeks before undergoing surgery for suspected breast cancer.

Her only consolation was her good health insurance, which she purchased through her husband's employer with a \$432 monthly subsidy through Utah's Premium Partnership for Health Insurance, or UPP.

But in May, Bunker will lose the subsidy and her health coverage -- an unexpected casualty of President Barack Obama's executive order affirming a ban on federal funding for abortion.

Because her private insurance plan covers elective abortions, she can no longer receive the UPP subsidy of state and federal dollars to purchase it.

"I never saw this coming. I can't believe the president didn't think about this," said the 34-year-old Kearns mother of four.

Utah health officials saw it coming, and regret the trouble it will cause the 266 working poor adults and 536 children who get help paying their insurance premiums through UPP.

UPP is funded with Medicaid dollars, which under long-standing state and federal rules, can't be used to pay for elective abortions. These rules were never understood to extend to private health insurance plans purchased with help from the government, said Utah Medicaid director Michael Hales.

But that changed in March when Obama, under political pressure from conservative Democrats, signed an order confirming the ban applies to insurance marketplaces, or exchanges, that states must create under the new federal health overhaul. The exchanges will help Americans buy private plans, sometimes with financial assistance from the government.

The Bunker household was among 400 that received notices of possible cancellation last week from the Utah Health Department. UPP participants were given until April 15 to verify whether their employer-sponsored insurance plans cover elective abortions.

On Monday, Bunker learned her plans does, which mean her family will lose her premium assistance starting May 1.

Health officials don't yet know the scope of the problem.

"We've gotten forms back from 60 percent of enrollees and, so far, about a third no longer qualify," said Nate Checketts, director of the state Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

But Checketts said families aren't without options.

Most of the children in UPP will qualify for CHIP, which covers the same population -- households with incomes under 200 percent of the poverty level, or about \$44,100 for a family of four.

Parents could be able to move into Utah's Primary Care Network, which pays for doctor visits and some prescriptions. The program will be open for enrollment May 10 through 24, Checketts said.

"Or they can continue their current health plan without the subsidy," he said.

Not everyone can afford that, and the new federal health law offers no relief until 2014. At that point, many

Americans will qualify for subsidies, acknowledged Lincoln Nehring, a policy analyst with the Utah Health Policy Project. "About 90 adults will be put in a tough spot because of this. But hopefully in three and a half years they'll never have to deal with this again."

That's little consolation to Bunker, who is working to get her kids on CHIP.

"We're lucky that way," Bunker said. "But to cover myself and my husband, it will cost \$352, which is basically our food money."

Bunker's husband, Jason, lost his job last year and found another, but took a \$20,000 pay cut. The dual-income family has learned to get by with less.

But Bunker said she has no recourse to shop for cheaper coverage, because her health problems make her uninsurable.

"I didn't vote for Obama and even though I think we need health reform, I think he went too fast," Bunker said.

kstewart@sltrib.com

Close Window

Send To Printer