

Obamacare threatens immigrants with loss of health coverage

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Federal health officials overseeing the Affordable Care Act (ACA), popularly known as Obamacare, are sending out warning letters to enrollees, threatening them with loss of coverage if they do not send in proper immigration forms and proof-of-citizenship documentation. About 310,000 people in the three-dozen states that utilize the federal ACA marketplace, HealthCare.gov, will receive these letters. The deadline for furnishing the documents is September 5, with coverage expiring on September 30 for those who do not provide them.

The letters say in large bold print, "Act by September 5, 2014 or Your Marketplace Health Insurance May End." This is the first example of the federal government enforcing regulations that prohibit immigrants without proper documentation from receiving health care under the ACA legislation.

Since the unveiling of HealthCare.gov on October 1 last year, the web site has had innumerable problems verifying applicants' identity and corresponding documents. To facilitate the process of verification, the federal government is now working in conjunction with Serco, a private contractor, to resolve these discrepancies.

The rollout of the Obamacare federal web site has been plagued by glitches and technical difficulties, directly affecting those people who have already sent in proper documents. In addition, undocumented immigrants—many of whom have no access to health care—are excluded from coverage altogether by law.

By late spring, some 970,000 cases had discrepancies. Some 450,000 of them have since been resolved, according to Aaron Albright, a spokesman for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, a subset of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) which is managing the federal insurance

exchange. None of these 450,000 enrollees were found ineligible.

Serco has been processing more than 200,000 cases, comparing consumers' documents with federal government records. The individuals in the last 310,000 cases have been repeatedly warned by Serco, both by phone, email, and standard mail, to hand over proper documents. However, according to the *Washington Post*, reports have surfaced that Serco has been incapable of matching the paperwork with applicants. Regardless, Albright said, "People will have to [re]send in their info if we don't have a record of it."

This ineptitude on the part of the federal government and Serco is forcing eligible applicants to hastily obtain the requested paperwork or face loss of coverage. Some people may not even receive the letters because they have moved, may disregard them because they believe they have already sent in the documents, or may think the letters are a scam.

The *Post* spoke to Vicky Tucci of West Palm Beach, Florida, who helps people sign up for health care at the Legal Aid Society, who she has appeared on local radio stations to encourage people to take these letters seriously. Some people have contacted her asking if the letters are scams, saying that they had already sent in the documentation but keep getting annoying notices.

Organizations representing immigrants and low-income workers have objected to the warning letters. In a letter sent July 31, 150 organizations appealed to HHS Secretary Sylvia Mathews Burwell that these people be allowed to keep their health insurance due to insufficient time to send in proper documents.

However the organizations sending the letter—which include immigrant advocates, health policy specialists and unions—made clear their agreement with the exclusion of undocumented immigrants from ACA

program, writing: “As organizations that have worked hard to ensure the efforts of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to fully implement the Affordable Care Act are successful, the undersigned organizations look forward to working with you to ensure all *eligible* immigrant families are able to successfully enroll in affordable health coverage” (emphasis added).

Far from defending the right of all US residents, documented or not, to obtain health care coverage, the letter merely suggests different methods or procedures the federal government can use to fix some of its technical difficulties. Signees to the letter include the AFL-CIO, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the National Health Law Program, and the National Immigration Law Center.



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