



Public comments sought on proposed Medicaid changes

Tom Jackson

April 20, 2016

Officials have begun taking public comments on a controversial Ohio proposal to require many Medicaid recipients in Ohio to pay into health savings accounts and to make co-payments on their medical care.

The state is seeking a waiver from the Obama administration — permission to put the plan into effect — and has scheduled two public hearings on the matter and is taking comments by email and postal mail (see box.)

One hearing will be Thursday in Columbus, while the other will be April 26 in Cincinnati.

U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, a critic of the proposed Medicaid changes, told reporters Wednesday that he questions why a public hearing isn't being held in Cleveland.

According to a fact sheet published by the Ohio Department of Medicaid, the Healthy Ohio Program, as the changes are called, calls for every non-disabled adult enrolled in Medicaid to be enrolled into a health savings account.

Every enrollee would be required to pay 2 percent of the family's income, up to an annual limit of \$99, into the health savings account. The Ohio Medicaid program would then put an additional \$1,000 in each HSA every year.

Recipients would be required to make copayments, but only after they had spent all of the cash in their health savings accounts.

Details of the complete proposal are available at 1.usa.gov/1WFWs3V.

Proponents of health savings accounts, such as the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., argue that the accounts give patients more control over their health care spending and lower costs

by encouraging patients to save money where they can, because they are spending their own money.

The Healthy Ohio program was passed by Republicans in the Ohio General Assembly.

Although Gov. John Kasich had proposed making some Medicaid recipients pay premiums, administration officials have distanced themselves from one aspect of the plan. They told lawmakers that the Obama administration was unlikely to agree to boot people out of Medicaid coverage if they don't pay their premiums. Lawmakers, however, passed the plan, and the governor signed it into law.

State Rep. Jim Butler, R-Oakwood, the main Healthy Ohio proponent, explained in a press release last year that Medicaid recipients would pay a maximum of \$8 a month into their HSA accounts, with many people paying less. Participants can reduce their payments by earning points for such actions as quitting smoking or losing weight.

Brown, who didn't mention to reporters that Ohio is proposing to provide \$1,000 a year to the health savings accounts, emphasized that the program would raise costs for participants and would eliminate some from the Medicaid rolls.

Brown said the proposal would "gut" Medicaid expansion and invited Ohioans to go to his website, brown.senate.gov, and leave comments explaining how Medicaid expansion has helped them.

The senator said that more than 600,000 Ohioans have obtained Medicaid coverage as a result of the expansion, but that the Healthy Ohio proposal would increase Medicaid costs for up to 1 million Ohioans.

Want to comment?

WHAT: Comments are being sought on Ohio's proposed Healthy Ohio program.

PUBLIC HEARINGS: (1) 2 p.m. Thursday, April 21, Ohio Department of Medicaid, 50 W. Town St., Columbus (2) 2 p.m. April 26, Mercy Health Home Office, 1701 Mercy Health Place, Cincinnati in Rooms S144A & B. Visitors must use the main entrance.

WRITTEN COMMENTS: By email: HealthyOhio@medicaid.ohio.gov.

By mail: Healthy Ohio Program 1115 Demonstration Waiver, Bureau of Health Plan Policy, Ohio Department of Medicaid, 50 W Town St., 5th Floor, Columbus OH 43218.

By fax: (614) 995-1301 (please include Attn. Healthy Ohio Program 1115 Demonstration Waiver in the subject line)