Congressional Stalemate Creates Chaos for Obamacare Shoppers

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This year's Obamacare open enrollment period, which started November 1 in most states, is full of uncertainty and confusion for the more than 24 million people who buy health insurance through the federal and state Affordable Care Act [ACA] marketplaces.

Even with sign-up season underway, the fate of the enhanced premium tax credits that make coverage more affordable for 92% of enrollees remains up in the air, with the prospect of significantly higher premiums looming.

But there are steps marketplace shoppers can take to ensure they make the right choices for the upcoming plan year.

1. Understand How We Got Here

In 2021, as part of a COVID-era relief package, the ACA premium tax credits were enhanced to lower costs for previously eligible people and expand eligibility to people with incomes over 400% of the federal poverty level (which amounts to about $63,000 for one person in 2025). But those enhancements, which were extended in 2022, will expire at the end of 2025 unless Congress acts.

The debate over whether to extend them again has been at the center of a political battle of wills between Republicans and Democrats in Congress, a fight at the heart of the now month-old government shutdown.

The financial implications for many marketplace enrollees are huge. Average out-of-pocket premium payments for subsidized enrollees are projected to more than double if the enhanced tax credits expire, according to KFF, a health information nonprofit that includes KFF Health News.

"The longer this goes on, the more damage is done," said Cynthia Cox, a vice president and the director of the Program on the ACA at KFF. "If someone logs on November 1 and sees their premium doubling, they might just walk away."

That would be a mistake, marketplace experts agree. What is clear, though, is that buyers need to

beware and be informed.

2. Follow the News

It can be frustrating to track day-to-day Capitol Hill machinations. But that may be your best source for up-to-date information. Congress could make a deal to extend the enhanced subsidies anytime during the next few days, weeks, or months — or not. Either way, it could affect your enrollment decision. So, pay attention.

Don't count on the marketplace or your insurer to notify you about what you should expect to pay. "Many state marketplaces have hit delay" on sending consumers notices of net premiums, which take premium tax credits into account, said Sabrina Corlette, a co-director of Georgetown University's Center on Health Insurance Reforms.

The federal government doesn't send enrollees notices about plan premiums for the coming year for the 28 federally facilitated marketplaces. For 2026, it has said that health plans can also opt not to.

3. Update Your Account Information

Log in to your marketplace account and update your income, household size, and any other details that have changed.

This year, it's particularly important to provide an accurate estimate of your anticipated income for 2026.

A provision in HR 1, sometimes called the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, eliminated the caps on what many people were required to repay if they underestimated their projected income and received more premium assistance than they should have. Next year, people will have to repay the entire excess amount.

In the past few years, it's been possible to put your ACA insurance "on autopilot," with automatic reenrollment in your current or a similar plan. Given the uncertainty around premiums, this is not a good year to do that, enrollment specialists say.

This is especially true for people who, without a deal in Congress, will no longer qualify for subsidies next year, specifically those whose incomes are over 400% of the federal poverty level.

4. Shop Based on Sticker Prices

When people see their projected premiums, assuming Congress hasn't reached a deal to extend the enhanced credits, many will be shocked.

Health insurance premiums on the marketplaces are expected to increase, on average, 26% next year, according to KFF. That's the largest rate increase since 2018.

Until now, people have largely been shielded from those increases by the enhanced premium tax subsidies that nearly all enrollees receive. Here's how it works: Most people with ACA marketplace plans are responsible for paying a portion of their premium based on a sliding income scale, and the government pays the rest.

According to an analysis by KFF, if the enhanced credits are not renewed, a family of four with $75,000 in income, for example, will be responsible for paying $5,865 in annual premiums for a benchmark silver plan in 2026 — more than double the $2,498 it'll pay if they are renewed.

When evaluating a plan, focus on the listed price. If it's not affordable without the enhanced tax credits, it's not a good buy.

"People need to make a decision based on what is in front of them," Cox said.

If you can't afford the sticker price without the enhanced credits, consider enrolling in a less generous plan with a lower premium but a higher deductible, Cox said. Bronze plans must provide comprehensive coverage, including covering preventive care at no cost, and may cover some doctor visits before the deductible.

"In most cases, it makes more sense to have a bronze plan than to be uninsured," she said.

The Trump administration has been promoting catastrophic plans as a more affordable option for people who face financial hardship, including those who don't qualify for subsidies because their incomes are either less than 100% or more than 400% of the federal poverty level.

Similar to bronze plans, catastrophic plans cover a set of essential health benefits, provide free preventive care, and must cover at least three doctor visits before people reach their deductible. But catastrophic plan deductibles are the highest of any type of marketplace plan: $10,600 for individuals and $21,200 for families in 2026.

"They are expensive relative to what they cover," said Jennifer Sullivan, director of health coverage access at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, noting premiums can cost several hundred dollars.

5. Come Back, Check, and Recheck

If you're dismayed at premium prices on your first pass, "don't slam the computer shut and decide that there are no options for you," Sullivan said. "Congress might still act and things might change radically."

Lawmakers could restore the enhanced premium tax credits right up to the end of the year, or later.

In a majority of states, including the 28 that use the federal government's centralized marketplace, open enrollment lasts until January 15. There are also other key dates to remember.

In most states, people must enroll by December 15 for coverage starting January 1, and by January 15 for coverage starting February 1, though some states have later deadlines.

6. Wait To Pay Your Premium

Premium payments are generally due before the plan takes effect, although marketplaces and insurers have flexibility to extend deadlines, Corlette said.

They might allow people extra time to make a first payment, for example. “We’ve seen that in the past. State officials and insurance companies have gotten creative to try and keep people in coverage,” she said.

But if there is a last-minute deal and someone has already paid their premium for January coverage and received a lower tax credit than the deal provides, they should still be able to receive the higher credit.

“There are ways to make people whole,” Corlette said, although how that might happen this enrollment period is unclear.

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