



The HEALTH WATCHER

Welcome to the first edition of *Health Watcher* from Georgia Watch, the new topical newsletter of our Health Access Program (HAP). Here, we highlight the latest healthcare happenings that you need to know about and what they mean for you.

Hospital purchases of physician practices: Hospitals in the Atlanta area continue the national trend of purchasing private physician practices. Unfortunately for consumers, these mergers often result in higher charges and out of pocket costs, especially for specialty care. Why? Because hospitals have greater purchasing power than individual physicians and can charge more for services and negotiate more favorable rates with insurance companies. Even though these consolidations could provide more efficient and streamlined care for patients, any such gain is wiped out by the huge jump in price that often results. Both private and public insurance programs should re-evaluate their reimbursements so that consumers can reap the benefits of hospital /physician consolidations without being hit with a large increase in costs that hurts them and, ultimately, the entire healthcare system.

Health Insurance Marketplace: Georgia's Health Insurance Marketplace, operated by the federal government, is on track to be operational on October 1. Once up and running, individuals who do not have employer sponsored coverage will be able to compare and purchase private health plans. Subsidies will be available to make premiums affordable. Insurance companies will no longer be able to deny coverage or increase payments for pre-existing conditions, and several have already signed up to offer plans in Georgia. Among them are Aetna, Humana, and Blue Cross and Blue Shield, offering premiums as affordable as current employer based coverage. Open enrollment begins October 1, 2013 and runs through March 31, 2014 for 2014 plans. More information can be found at www.healthcare.gov or by calling 1-800-318-2596.

Georgia Watch's new Healthcare 2014 initiative offers classes to teach consumers and intermediaries about their healthcare options with a focus on the rapidly changing healthcare landscape under the Affordable Care Act. To schedule a presentation, please contact HAP Director Bill Rencher at brencher@georgiawatch.org.

Postponing the employer mandate: The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recently decided to delay for one year enforcement of the penalty against large employers (50 or more full time employees) who do not provide insurance for their employees. This delay could be good or bad for Georgia consumers. Numerous businesses, especially restaurants and retail establishments, have complained that the mandate would either cause them to raise their prices or close their doors. In addition, many businesses were talking about cutting back on full time employees to avoid the requirement. However, the employer mandate is a key part of the law that seeks to build on our already existing system of employer sponsored coverage. So consumers who would have had access to affordable coverage through work may not get covered next year unless they qualify for plans in the individual marketplace. This delay is intended to give HHS and businesses more time to work out their concerns, but there is only so much HHS can do without action from Congress.