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Residents get health insurance help at Norwich event

NORWICH — Several dozen people in search of health insurance got help finding it Saturday.

United Community and Family Services hosted a sign-up event with at its Edward and Mary Lord Family Health Center.

The event took place eight days before the Feb. 15 deadline to get health insurance or face a sizable income tax penalty.

Shortly after 11 a.m., all nine tables in the center's community room were occupied by individuals and families seeking health insurance and experts helping them. More people waited in a hallway outside.

"They're enrolling people in health care coverage through the Connecticut exchange," said Deborah Casey of Access Health CT. "They can enroll in Medicaid here or a private insurance plan. ... They're walking away with a health care plan today."

People also can sign up for themselves either online or by telephone.

"You can do it yourself, but it's difficult," Casey said.

Instead, she said, at the UCFS event, "Everyone here is trained to enroll people."

"It seems as though they feel a lot more relieved they got to talk with someone," said volunteer Whitney Allen, who was greeting people at the door.

"We're trying to help people with insurance," said UCFS worker Lilith McKee, who was assisting people to sign up. "We get to see what people go through if they signed up on their own."

Nell Bourgoïn came to the event with her two daughters, Erika and Chrissy, who are young adults. Bourgoïn has health insurance through an employer, and her daughters are still young enough to be covered by its family plan. But the plan doesn't provide them with dental coverage, Bourgoïn said.

"The real need is to get some dental insurance and to prepare for when they won't be eligible," she said.

Yolanda Bove, UCFS's director of community outreach, worked with the family for more than an hour, enrolling them online with Access Health CT, the state's health insurance exchange, finding what subsidies they were eligible for to help pay their premiums and showing them what health insurance plans are available.

Bove also took them to an insurance broker at another table in the room, who went over the costs and features of the different plans.

Private insurers Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield of CT, United Health Care, Healthy CT and ConnectiCare are offering plans.

"Yolanda has helped us understand how this works," Bourgoïn said. "I have found it very informative. ... To meet face to face with someone has really been great."

Unfortunately, she said, although she and her daughters got information they can use in the future, "we're unable to get dental insurance that makes any sense."

Similar events took place across the state, Casey said, as the deadline to sign up nears.

Last year, 256,000 Connecticut residents signed up to get health insurance through the state's exchange. This year, "we're going for half a million," Mary Jean Sznurkowski of Access Health CT said.

Under the federal Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, everyone has to be insured either through their employer or through their state's exchange.

"Just like car insurance, it is now a law that you must have health insurance," Casey said. People who don't have health insurance face a penalty of up to 1 percent of their annual income when they pay their income taxes, she said.



Yolanda Bove, director community outreach at United Community Family Services, left, helps Chrissy Bourgoïn, 23, of Lebanon, to enroll in Access Health CT Saturday in Norwich. John Shishmanian/NorwichBulletin.com

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