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Part-time school, college staff may lose state health benefits

A state Senate proposal would switch thousands of part-time school employees and college instructors to insurance exchanges under the Affordable Care Act.

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Thousands of part-time school employees and college instructors would be switched from state-funded health insurance to Affordable Care Act insurance exchanges under a complicated Senate budget proposal that backers say would save the state up to \$57 million over the next two years.

But so many different groups oppose the measure — including some of the state’s most powerful unions — that some think the Senate is using it as a bargaining chip in budget negotiations.

Sen. Andy Hill, R-Redmond, the Senate’s lead budget writer, originally proposed eliminating state-funded insurance for part-time employees in a bill, SB 5905. That language was later folded into the \$33 billion budget that passed the Senate last weekend.

It’s no bargaining chip, he says: “It’s an interesting policy. As we do Medicaid expansion, this is one of the places where we see some benefits.”

Few other states provide insurance for part-time employees, he added.

But Rep. Ross Hunter, D-Medina, lead budget writer for the House, said he does not believe the proposal is serious. Hunter said it represents a cut in education funding, but in the end wouldn’t necessarily save money.

And it’s unpopular among his constituents.

“I got 3,000 emails from all over the state on this issue,” he said. “I’ve never gotten this much email from any issue.”

Under the proposal, part-time workers — who currently are eligible for state-supported health, dental and vision insurance — would instead be paid an additional \$2 per hour to buy insurance on the health-care exchange.

Residents will be able to shop for insurance from various providers on the exchange starting Oct. 1.

Coverage would begin Jan. 1.

For some, the exchanges may be a better deal financially, Hill said. And Hunter agreed that a small number of employees would do better — although he thinks a greater number could do worse.

For public-school employees, whose contracts are bargained every few years with local school districts, taking away the state insurance allocation would represent a cut, said Washington Education Association spokesman Rich Wood.

“Some of the lowest-paid school employees” — including bus drivers and cafeteria workers — “would be losing their health care,” he said.

An employee may not qualify under the exchanges if his or her spouse has employer-provided health care coverage, and those who buy insurance there are likely to find the costs higher, and the benefits less generous, Wood said.

It's unclear how the change would affect adjunct instructors at the state's four-year colleges and particularly at its 34 community and technical colleges, which rely heavily on part-time adjunct faculty to do much of the teaching. Many of those instructors consider their state insurance an essential benefit, said Karen Strickland, head of the American Federation of Teachers-Seattle.

The proposal could affect up to 3,500 community-college faculty members, and “nobody's got a clue how it works,” said Marty Brown, executive director of the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. “I understand the angst that the adjunct folks have, because we can't get answers for them.”

Antonia Bennie-George, who teaches physics at Green River Community College, is worried about the change because her husband was recently laid off. The family, including three of her four children, will lose his insurance coverage in the fall.

Bennie-George had planned to go on state insurance. Because one of her children has eye problems that have required lens implants and surgery, she's been especially concerned about losing vision coverage, which is not provided by the Affordable Care Act.

This proposal is “a very bad idea that follows a very bad trend in higher education of saving money by exploiting the majority of the faculty who do the actual teaching,” she said.

Despite his reservations about the proposal, Hunter says he thinks the state should investigate ways the Affordable Care Act could be used to insure some part-time employees in some job categories.

Hill said the Senate is still negotiating the issue.

“Clearly, people have come up with concerns, and we're working on assuaging those concerns in the negotiations and with staff,” he said.

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