

Language impairment could impact Health Benefit Exchange enrollment

By Robin Wulffson, M.D., LA Health Examiner

On February 29, researchers from UCLA and UC Berkeley released the results of a study that found that many Californians are likely to miss out on healthcare benefits from the California Health Benefit Exchange due to language barriers. The program expands access to affordable health coverage as part of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Researchers from the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, and the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education developed a micro-simulation to estimate the number of individuals impacted by language barriers. The study projects that more than 1 million limited-English proficient (LEP) adults will be eligible to receive tax credits to purchase affordable coverage in the state's Health Benefit Exchange; however, only 42% of eligible LEP adults are expected to enroll in the program because of language barriers. The micro-simulation also predicted that if language is not a barrier, participation by LEP adults could increase to 53%, a difference of approximately 110,000 individuals.

"The evidence suggests that Californians who do not speak English very well are at a disadvantage in terms of accessing healthcare reform programs," noted lead author Daphna Gans, a research scientist at the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. "These are difficult times for California families, and ensuring every Californian has access to quality, affordable health care is vital for our economic recovery," noted California Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez, who authored legislation (AB 1602) in 2010 establishing the exchange. He added, "The Health Benefit Exchange will help lower the cost of health insurance for every Californian, but it's vital for every eligible Californian to enroll to ensure we bring health care costs down as much as possible for California's working families."

According to the researchers, more than 15 million California residents speak a language other than English at home and nearly half (7 million) of them have limited proficiency in English. They noted that their study stresses the importance of adopting a diverse strategy for outreach and education. "The exchange is a key opportunity to make Californians healthier," said Ellen Wu, executive director of the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network. She added, "We have to do this right. Our success in implementing this new program will be measured not just by the number of people enrolled but by the state's ability to reach those who are most often left behind. We have to target resources through multicultural and multilingual outreach to ensure that communities of color who are eligible, particularly people who speak English less than very well, enroll in coverage."

The researchers employed the California Simulation of Insurance Markets model, which was a micro-simulation developed by researchers at UCLA and UC Berkeley. The model incorporates a variety of official data sources, including the California Health Interview Survey, to estimate the impact of

various elements of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act on employer decisions to offer insurance coverage and on individual decisions to obtain coverage in California.

Click on this link to view the full report.



Approximately 110,000 individuals may miss out on healthcare benefits because of a language barrier

Credits: Robin Wulffson, MD

Related topics

California Health Benefit Exchange

language barrier

healthcare benefits

tax credits

Affordable Care Act

UCLA Center for Health Policy Research

California Health Benefit Exchange | February 29, 2012



Robin Wulffson, M.D.

LA Health Examiner