

More than 2,500 Santa Cruz County seniors looking for a new health care plan

SANTA CRUZ - About 2,500 senior citizens in Santa Cruz County will have to choose a new health care plan since AARP MedicareComplete SecureHorizons HMO announced it will stop serving Santa Cruz County in 2011.

SecureHorizons, offered by UnitedHealthcare, is a Medicare Advantage plan with additional prescription drug coverage not provided by standard Medicare. Santa Cruz County members paid a monthly premium of about \$85 and a small co-pay for a doctor visit.

The company notified impacted members of the plan closure by Oct. 2, according to Matt Burns, a spokesman for UnitedHealthcare's Medicare business, who said the decision to close was based on an assessment of its sustainability.

"Plans dropping seniors because they are not making enough money is common, sadly, and puts lots of stress on the patient and the providers," said Rama Khalsa, administrator of the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency.

"My phone's been ringing off the hook," said Lou Tuosto, a Soquel insurance agent who sold the SecureHorizons plan.

Health policy researcher Linda Bergthold said the only other Medicare HMO in Santa Cruz County is HealthNet's Healthy Heart plan, which charges a monthly premium of \$181 with a \$10 co-pay for a doctor visit.

"This is serious," said Dorothy Wash, who has been with SecureHorizons for 10 years and wants to get information from an independent source rather than an insurance agent.

She said her neighbors are looking to HICAP, the Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy Program at Senior Network Services in Live Oak, for advice.

The letter UnitedHealthcare sent listed the names of two dozen health plans serving senior citizens in Santa Cruz County but not information on features or costs.

"All of the options aren't out yet," HICAP manager Debbie Reed said, noting a complete list will not be posted on the Medicare website until Oct. 15. After that, her program can set up counseling sessions.

"This is big when a plan like SecureHorizons leaves the area," Reed said. "We're strategizing as to how best to serve people."

Reed has three staffers who are "counselor-ready" and nine trained volunteers. Other volunteers were trained in May but will need further training to make sure they know which plans will be available in Santa Cruz County in 2011 and what they offer.

Reed expects another 90 senior citizens in Santa Cruz County will have to switch plans. They bought private fee-for-service plans, with premiums ranging from \$78 to \$174 per month. Word from Medicare is that none of those 11 plans will be available in the county in 2011, according to Reed.

This is the time of year when Medicare beneficiaries are supposed to review their plans for changes and consider whether to switch. Generally, they have to decide by Dec. 15 to make sure the company gets their enrollment information by Dec. 31.

People with SecureHorizons will have more time, until Jan. 31, to choose a new plan.

Burns said United Healthcare examines reimbursement rates and provider network of its offerings each year.

"Where we can adapt to the changes, we do," he said. "Where we cannot, we must make the decision to close the plan."

The UnitedHealthcare announcement prompted Physicians Medical Group, a network of 300 doctors in Santa Cruz County, to reassure their patients.

"Many of our senior patients have been receiving care from our physicians for decades," says Dr. Nancy Greenstreet, medical director of Physicians Medical Group. "That relationship will remain even if the patient selects a different coverage option."

Most doctors in Physicians Medical Group accept new Medicare patients, she said.

Bergthold said most of the plans listed in the letter from SecureHorizons only covered prescription drugs.

She found Anthem Freedom Blue, a preferred provider organization, with a zero monthly premium for her mother.

Wash, who serves on the management committee for Spring Lakes Mobile Home Park in Scotts Valley, is all too familiar with the escalating cost of health care. The park, home to 300 people, pays Blue Cross for health insurance for five employees.

"We just got a 19.5 percent increase," she said.

"I feel all seniors are panicking right now," said Kay Zwerling. "They're forgetting we're all covered until the end of December. We're going to have choices. We have three months to decide."

A frequent commentator on KSCO radio, which is owned by her family, Zwerling sees health care reform as an issue in the November elections.

"I suspect if things go the way I hope, everything Obama wanted to do about health care is going to be changed," she said.