



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: September 12, 2017

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Census Bureau Data Bring Very Good News on Multiple Fronts

Uninsured Rate Declines in Wisconsin and Even Faster Nationally

MADISON, WI – The number of Wisconsinites who do not have health insurance fell sharply during the first three years of implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), according to new survey data released today by the U.S. Census Bureau. Approximately 218,000 fewer Wisconsin residents were uninsured last year than in 2013, a decline of 42 percent.

National data from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) show that the number of Americans without health insurance fell by 40 percent from 2013 to 2016, and the percentage who are uninsured is now at an all-time low. That includes a drop in the uninsured of almost 2.5 million last year, on top of an improvement of more than 15 million in 2014 and 2015, after key parts of the health care reform law took effect.

Jon Peacock, research director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, said the new data is good news for Wisconsin, but not a reason to be complacent. “With an estimated 300,000 Wisconsinites who are still uninsured, we can do much better,” Peacock said. “It’s time for our state to make additional policy changes to reach the Governor’s goal of cutting in half Wisconsin’s uninsured rate.”

Peacock recommended two policy measures that he said could get Wisconsin’s uninsured rate down to the Governor’s target of about 250,000. “First, state lawmakers should take advantage of the part of the health care reform law that would pay for the expansion of BadgerCare coverage to low-income working adults who are slightly above the poverty level,” Peacock said. “Second, we need to invest in outreach and enrollment assistance for the federally subsidized private insurance marketplace, in order to counter actions the President has taken that could reduce participation.”

WCCF’s analysis of the new data found that the states that expanded Medicaid reduced the number of uninsured by an average of 47 percent during the first three years of the major health care reform changes, compared to just 30 percent in the non-expansion states. In each of the four states bordering Wisconsin, all of which have expanded Medicaid, the drop in the uninsured rate has ranged from 47 to 51 percent, compared to a 42% decline in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin is still among the top ten states in the percentage of people with insurance (tied for 10th), but its rank has been slipping. In 2016, Kentucky, West Virginia, Connecticut and Rhode Island all surpassed or tied Wisconsin’s rate of insurance coverage.

The new data on health insurance coverage was not the only good news released today by the Census Bureau. Another very positive finding in the national data is that the typical household's income rose by 3.2 percent or \$1,800 last year, after adjusting for inflation. The household income gain from 2014 to 2016 is the largest for any two-year period on record (with data going back to the 1960s).

In addition, the national poverty rate fell from 13.5 percent last year, which is a very substantial improvement from 13.5 percent in 2015 and 14.8 percent in 2014.

Peacock warned that the significant gains in income and health insurance coverage that were achieved over the last two years could be erased very quickly by proposed bills and budget changes being considered by Congress. "An analysis by the Congressional Budget Office showed that proposed changes to Medicaid and Affordable Care Act would totally reverse the dramatic increase in health care coverage achieved since 2013," Peacock said.

Another large batch of Census Bureau survey data will be released on Thursday. That will include state-level data on income and poverty from the American Community Survey. It will also include data on health insurance, poverty and income for all counties and cities that have a population of at least 65,000.

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Kids Forward, formerly the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, advocates for effective, long-lasting solutions that break down barriers to success for children and families in Wisconsin. Using research and a community-informed approach, Kids Forward works to help every kid, every family, and every community thrive.