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GOVERNMENT BEGINS NEW ACA ENROLLMENT PERIOD FOR 2021 INSURANCE; SPECIAL OPEN ENROLLMENT TO RUN THREE MONTHS, FROM FEB. 15-MAY 15

Greenville, N.C. – If you re-open the Marketplace, they will come.

And come insurance-seekers did, all last week, via a steady stream of calls and scheduled appointments, in the first few days of the special new Open Enrollment (OE) period that began Feb. 15, to buy Affordable Care Act (ACA) health coverage on the federal Health Insurance Marketplace.

The new OE period, intended to help address the health and financial consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, will run through May 15, making it twice as long as any regular OE in the last several years.

Throughout this OE, Greenville-based nonprofit Access East's Certified Marketplace Navigators are again providing one-on-one assistance, including ACA enrollment help, to consumers seeking affordable quality health-coverage. Navigators are a grant-funded community service, and provide impartial free assistance, receiving no commissions regardless of which insurance plan a consumer might choose.

Navigators are also helping insurance-seekers determine if federal subsidies are available to help offset the cost of premiums.

"Year in and year out, nine out of 10 North Carolinians get financial assistance to help pay for this coverage," said Mark Van Arnam, director of the statewide N.C. Navigator Consortium.

Consumers across eastern North Carolina have several options when scheduling free Navigator enrollment help:

- Assistance by phone, or by WebEx or Zoom, available from 8 a.m.-5 p.m. weekdays
- In-person assistance, available from 5-7 p.m. weekdays, and from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. on weekends, at the Access East office in Stanton Square Shopping Center, Greenville. Masks are required both for consumers and for Navigators, with other COVID-19 safety measures also in place, including plexiglass-partition enrollment stations.

All Navigator assistance, whether by phone, virtual or in-person, requires an appointment; there are no walk-ins this OE, due to COVID safety considerations.

To schedule a Navigator appointment, call (252) 847-3027 or toll-free (877) 755-5438, or visit www.NCNavigator.net.

In the midst of the continuing pandemic, having quality health insurance may be more important than ever, noted Shantell Cheek, director of Access East Uninsured Programs.

"Having health insurance adds an additional layer of protection for people right now, to ensure that their continuity of care is not disrupted, in case they should contact the virus, or if they have any other chronic condition," Cheek explained.

"We have so much to worry about in our daily lives," Van Arnam added, "keeping healthy, keeping on masks, making sure that we're staying socially distanced, and trying to keep up with our work and family obligations. Having one less thing on our minds is really great, and when it's something as big as our health and being able to take care of ourselves if, God forbid, we should get sick with the virus or any kind of other (health) issue ...

"We can lay our heads on our pillows at night knowing we're not just a broken bone or a serious illness away from losing our homes."

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