Great Research Conversations

Q & A from SHARE Webinar*: Using Income Tax Information to Target Medicaid and CHIP Outreach

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*Q & A based on transcript of webinar, with minor editing for readability and formatting

Q & A

Q: Is there information available about the number of applications received as a result of the outreach in Maryland? If you don't have that information, do you have plans to collect it for this next round?

DI: In Maryland, at the moment, we do not have that information. Part of the reason is that there is no way to distinguish between the people who applied through this program and the people who are applying through other programs. All of the applications are lumped together. Going forward, I think one way of collecting that information is to make the application form different for this outreach than the regular Medicaid application form. Then we would have better sense of the people applied just through this outreach…The Comptroller's office [and] the Department of Health…are talking about getting a separate application.

Q: In Iowa, did you actually have people handwriting on the brochures to mark the 50,000 [sent through this initiative]?

BFJ: We did!

Q: And were you disappointed in receiving only 475 marked applications? …Are you concerned that it will be lower in the next round?

BFJ: Yes and yes. With any direct mail campaign…if you get 2-3% you're actually doing okay. We didn't even get that, so we were very concerned about that number. Actually it worked out perfect that some of them were marked and some of them we asked people, because then we had a really good statistic back about 'Oh wow, what a difference this made.' We can estimate that we got more back because we know that first 29,000 came back at double the return rate, so we assume that the second, almost 30,000, probably did as well. We just don't have the proof. The thing with the postcard – do we think that we won't be able to track it as well with a postcard – yes. We're looking at, especially online, putting a code on the postcard so when people register – kind of like your promotional code for an airline or something – we're looking at doing something like that for them to get into it. We're also looking at an 'I heard about you online' box being a mandatory box that they can't move on to the next step until they put something in. Those are some things that we're looking at, but the postcard is really coming down to a cost issue. We could do it so much cheaper and still get the word out even if we can't track it quite as well. That cost-savings in this economy is just too good to be true.

Q: Has either [Iowa or Maryland] considered trying to be more targeted towards different demographics in the tax form? Right now you're just using income and dependent coverage, so were there other characteristics - maybe zip code or location - or other characteristics or demographics that might help you better target your mailings?

DI: In Maryland, they're just using the tax form at the moment. They're outreaching to everybody – they are not targeting to any specific zip codes or regions. However, they are also thinking about starting to use the school lunch program and that one is targeted to specific areas like Baltimore City zip codes.

BFJ: I think in Iowa – with a smaller population that a lot of states that are probably listening – at this time realistically we probably wouldn't limit based on that. Again, we're just currently getting those statistics back from the Department of Revenue that should show what areas they sent all of these mailings to. Once we get that detailed information maybe we'll be able to take a different look at that. But we're really looking at that to use some of our other outreach dollars like radio spots or billboards or newspaper articles or something like that. We were looking to take zip code information and target that way.

Q: Do you have sense of the percentage of low-income households that actually file their state tax returns?

DI: In Maryland, when we spoke with the Comptroller's Office, they said that virtually all low-income households [file their taxes], but I'm sure that's not entirely true. Most of them do because for each child, you get about a $2,000 income tax credit, so most of them do file it. One thing we know is that we are able to identify 1.4 million dependent children – we do know we've got 1.5 million children in Maryland – so we know that a lot of them are filing, but we don't know an exact percentage.

BFJ: We [in Iowa] do not have an exact number on that either.

Q: Was there any discussion about having DHS do the phone calls and district outreach to those targeted families, rather than doing just an overall mailing?

BFJ: That really came down to the data-sharing issue. Department of Revenue is very protective of their lists because they don't want to breach people's confidentiality. The problem was, even when we were looking at data-sharing, we were looking at doing a blind share so that people's income wouldn't be available widespread. And so, we haven't really looked into that – I don't think our Department of Revenue would be overly receptive to that because it would mean they were sharing people's information. Even when we were looking at either zip code or schools or county information, if there's not at least 5 people in that zip code or school district, they won't share the information with us. They'll go to the next step out because of confidentiality reasons on their part.

Q: That seems to be one of the key issues – that the Department of Revenue is very tight with their data and their privacy requirements. What was the gap between when the Office of Revenue got the tax information and when the mailings went out?

DI: In Maryland it took about six months, which is usually a long gap. What they did is they sent them out in batches of about 30,000 so they did not overwhelm the eligibility folks. As I mentioned earlier too – they did not hire additional staff. It took about six months for them to send out the applications.

BFJ: We did about four weeks. So, every four weeks through the tax season we did a mailing, up until our last big mailing in May. We did one final mailing in August that was anybody who had an issue with their tax return – anything that looked funny the Department of Revenue was taking another look at. If somebody put in too many zeros or something like that or had ten dependents, we did their mailing in August. Those could have been up to six months old, but that was only about 4,000 people so it wasn't as big.

Q: Were the insurance questions added to the 1040 and also the 1040EZ form? Were they included on both forms?

DI: Yes, in Maryland, they were included on both forms. Electronically too.

BFJ: Yes, in Iowa, they were as well.

Q: …could you clarify the process – In Maryland once the Department of Revenue received the information, did you sent out an actual application or did you send out information and if they replied to that, an application would be mailed?

DI: They actually sent out the actual application and instructions on how to enroll.

Q: Do you expect to see a lot of resistance from parents if you include a consent form? Is that, again, going to reduce your ability to get enrollment?

DI: It could potentially affect it slightly, but we don't yet know. I'm not quite sure.

Q: Is there any information or plans to get information about how many people said "No health care coverage" actually meant insurance or access to care?

DI: There is really no way of getting that information due to the privacy issue between the Comptroller's Office and the Department of Health. We actually don't know how many people enrolled because of this outreach therefore it's hard for us to know how many of them called because they were confused. One potential tracking mechanism would be, after we send out the 30,000 applications, we can ask the folks at the eligibility office to essentially quantify the number of calls that come in because people are confused and how many are already enrolled in the program.

Q: With the new information from Iowa showing a rather low response rate (only 475 children enrolled), is there enough evidence that you think your state will continue this method for the next few years? Or is there concern that this might not be the appropriate mechanism for outreach?

BFJ: I see us continuing it, at least for a few more years. Unfortunately at this point, I think it'll really come down to budget. Since the changes have been made on the tax form, we've kind of already endured the expensive part of the project. Our governor has a pretty strong feeling on this that he does want all Iowan children covered.

DI: I think Maryland will continue it for at least the next couple years. Part of the reason is that Maryland has increased their Medicaid enrollment by 20 percent - it means something somewhere is working correctly. This could possibly explain the increase in enrollment. However, since we can't distinguish folks that came in because of this particular outreach, we can't really tell you how successful it is. We do know that we have the highest increase in Medicaid enrollment in the country and I wouldn't say that we've got the worst economy compare to other states.