

White House contradicts state on Obamacare rates



Nearly 1 million Floridians signed up for health plans in the inaugural year of the law also known as Obamacare and 91 percent received a subsidy to help pay their monthly premiums. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Staff and wire report

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The White House has fired back at state officials' claims that health insurance premiums under the Affordable Care Act will jump significantly next year, insisting that instead, the majority of Florida policyholders would see decreases in what they will pay.

An analysis by the federal Department of Health and Human Services released Wednesday said the cost of a mid-level "silver" plan, the type of policy purchased by 73 percent of Floridians participating in the new health care program, would drop 3 percent in Hillsborough County and 8 percent in Pinellas.

That differs from [information released Monday](#) by the state's Office of Insurance Regulation, which said premiums would rise an average of 13.2 percent next year.

Analyzing rates for the 2015 health plans sold through President Barack Obama's signature legislation can be tricky and politicians on both sides are eager to use the figures as evidence of the law's success

or failure.

An estimated 75 percent of Floridians live in areas where the silver premium will actually decline, said Tasha Bradley, a spokeswoman for HHS.

The agency's analysis showed the cost of that silver plan will decrease by 6 percent in Miami, 12 percent in Orlando and 17 percent in West Palm Beach.

State officials calculated the average of premiums for all plans, bronze, silver, gold and platinum to arrive at the figure, but the Obama administration says it's misleading to average the premium costs of all plans because most people purchase silver plans.

Federal officials also weighted each county by its population when analyzing the figures instead of a statewide average. The premiums for silver plans in some areas will increase, but in big cities' enrollment was robust and multiple insurance companies competed to drive down costs. Federal health officials said the actual cost ends up being much different when the county's population is used instead of a statewide population.

Harvey Bennett, a spokesman for the Office of Insurance Regulation, said "any assertion that overall rates are going down in Florida is false."

In a statement emailed to The Tampa Tribune, he said that using only the second-lowest silver plan rate is misleading and is not likely to be representative of the average premium change within that county.

The Office of Insurance Regulation distributed actual 2014 enrollment provided by companies and projected the 2015 enrollment, Bennett said. It included all levels of coverage but gave added weight to the silver plans and companies with more enrollees in high-population areas, he said.

Nearly 1 million Floridians signed up for health plans in the inaugural year of the law also known as Obamacare and 91 percent received a subsidy to help pay their monthly premiums. Subsidies are determined by a complex formula that factors in a customer's age, income and ZIP code.

Several insurance companies did raise their rates in Florida. Of the 11 returning plans, eight filed average rate increases ranging from 11 to 23 percent, and three filed rate decreases ranging from 5 to 12

percent, according to the state. Three new companies will participate next year for the first time.

Health insurance rates have risen as much as 20 or 30 percent in recent years. Critics of the health overhaul, including Florida Gov. Rick Scott, have seized on rate increases as a signal they say shows the law isn't working.

Scott and the Republican-controlled Legislature have refused to build a state health insurance exchange, and Florida was one of many states that refused to expand Medicaid as part of the Affordable Care Act.

State regulators used to be able to review and potentially reject rate increases proposed by insurers; the Legislature, with Scott's blessing, also passed a law in the wake of ACA that removes that ability.

Information from Tribune reporter Jerome R. Stockfisch and The Associated Press was used in this report.