

An ObamaCare Exchange Horror Story — Cover Oregon Troubles Continue

Like all state exchanges and the federal government exchange, Cover Oregon — Oregon's Affordable Care Act exchange — was supposed to be up and running in October.

It is still not working.

The exchange — like the federal exchange HealthCare.gov — continues to be a political focus in Oregon and an embarrassment to Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber.



Jason Conger

Rep. Jason Conger is a Republican from Bend, Oregon. He is running against Kitzhaber for the governorship. Conger has been very critical of Cover Oregon and sent a letter to Kitzhaber saying the state has spent \$200 million of the \$300 million the federal government gave Oregon to build the exchange and it's still not working.

“Cover Oregon is a train wreck, and the more we learn the worse it gets. We now know that \$200 million has been spent — and the website still doesn't work,” he said.

He added that another solution needs to be sought. “It is time to shut Cover Oregon down and look at other options. Thousands of Oregonians who have lost their health plans will have to pay the Obamacare tax because they did not purchase health insurance from the exchange. But the exchange doesn't work.”

Conger said trying to fix the unfixable is foolish. He urges Kitzhaber and the Legislature to look at “affordable, reliable alternatives that will actually allow Oregonians to purchase health insurance.”

Conger has asked the governor to give Oregonians a waiver that lets them purchase insurance from private carriers and for those that qualify for the ObamaCare tax subsidies to be able to use those subsidies there.

No response yet from Kitzhaber.

The Oregon Legislature is also not happy with Cover Oregon. House Speaker Tina Kotek — a Portland Democrat — said the Legislature is going to address the exchange's problems.

Like Conger, Kotek is concerned about the non-rollout, missed deadlines, tax credits that can't be used and total lack of accountability by Cover Oregon and its contractors.

“When all is said and done, more Oregonians are going to be able to get help when they’re sick, and Oregonians are going to save money on their health insurance. Right now we must make Cover Oregon worthy of the public’s confidence. We will ensure that Oregonians get the health care they need, we will hold people accountable, and we will make sure these mistakes are not repeated,” she said.



Tina Kotek

Here’s what the Oregon House is looking at as a fix:

- Extend the state’s high risk insurance pool (OMIP) to allow coverage for OMIP members that were not enrolled prior to the beginning of the year.
- Direct Cover Oregon to seek a waiver from the federal government extending enrollment deadlines in order to increase enrollment numbers.
- Direct Cover Oregon to secure federal tax credits for small businesses eligible for the Small Business Health Options Program (SHOP).
- Work to ensure Oregonians who purchase a qualified health plan can access federal insurance subsidies.
- Extend existing state agency whistleblower protections to employees of Cover Oregon.
- Require that complex and costly contracts, in excess of \$1 million, through Cover Oregon or future public corporations undergo an independent quality assurance review before and during the project.
- Provide spending authority for an independent, third party audit of Cover Oregon’s management, governance, and procedures, to ensure a complete understanding of what went wrong.
- Require that the Legislature, in addition to the governor, receive routine briefings on the findings and be full partners in the audit.
- Allow the governor to remove the entire Cover Oregon board of directors in a single year.

Kotek said for Oregonians to have any kind of trust in Cover Oregon the Legislature needs to act now. “Over the coming months there will be a lot of positive stories about Oregonians who are getting coverage for the first time, or who are seeing their premiums cut in half. That’s the good news; but we need to take these steps now to help people, ensure accountability, and give Oregonians confidence in public contracts in the future,” she added.

Senate President Peter Courtney agrees. “Our first priority has to be making sure that our people are covered. Too many Oregonians have lived too long without health insurance. We need to fix what’s broken. We need to hold those who broke it accountable. We need to take steps to guard against it happening again.”

He is letting the House and Kotek do the heavy lifting but has filed a bill to allow Oregon Medical Insurance Pool Account funds to be used to give healthcare coverage for those in the high risk insurance pool and who are not enrolled in a plan at the beginning of the year.

Courtney has also told the governor that the right people need to be in charge of Cover Oregon and he's not sure that's the current case. "The governor and Cover Oregon need to take advantage of the Legislature being in session. If changes need to be made, now is the time to make them. I've asked over and over again what they need us to do to ensure that Cover Oregon works for the people who need it," he said.

To assure that things go smoothly in the future, Courtney is going to introduce legislation that lets the Legislature be more involved in the oversight of projects like Cover Oregon.