COVID-19 job loss could leave 27 million uninsured—what to do now

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What’s the news: Exacerbating the devastating health impacts of COVID-19, the pandemic has also exacted an economic toll, with 31 million workers filing unemployment claims in March and April. As of May 2, nearly 27 million could lose their employer-sponsored health insurance coverage following job loss. These newly uninsured have opportunities to sign up for other coverage, including those provided under the Affordable Care (ACA), says an analysis from the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF).

The estimated 26.8 million who would be uninsured includes those losing their own employer-sponsored insurance as well as those losing coverage they had through a family member losing a job. KFF estimates that about 19 million additional people will be able to retain insurance after job loss by being added to an employer-sponsored plan held by a spouse or parent.

According to the KFF analysis, 12.7 million of the newly uninsured following job loss are eligible for Medicaid, while another 8.4 million can qualify for subsidies to purchase covered offered on the ACA marketplaces.

Here are the key resources that physicians should share with newly uninsured patients to help them get coverage.

Why it’s important: Numerous studies show that patients without insurance live sicker and die younger. To improve the health of our nation and especially to save lives during the COVID-19 pandemic that has killed nearly 100,000 people in the U.S., all Americans should have access to meaningful, affordable health care.

“COVID-19 shows that our efforts to cover the uninsured in this nation are not complete; more needs to be done,” wrote AMA President Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA, in a recent AMA Leadership Viewpoints column.

The AMA and a coalition of medical and business organizations have outlined steps Congress can
take to help companies maintain their employees’ insurance during the COVID-19 public health emergency and to bolster the health insurance marketplace.

Specifically, the organizations called on Congress to:

**Provide employers with temporary subsidies to preserve health benefits.** Many employers experiencing loss of revenue reluctantly reduce benefits to manage expenses. Congress could help by providing subsidies to offset the cost of preserving health coverage.

**Cover the costs of Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (COBRA).** Many may maintain job-based coverage through COBRA but find the costs to be prohibitive—especially when facing a significant loss of income. Congress could subsidize COBRA costs to former employees.

**Expand use of health savings accounts (HSAs).** Congress could temporarily lift limits on what HSAs can be used for in order to provide access to additional resources to pay insurance costs.

**Open a special enrollment period for health insurance marketplaces.** While individuals who recently lost employer-based coverage are eligible to enroll in the marketplaces, Congress could create a one-time marketplace special enrollment period specifically for individuals who are uninsured and not otherwise eligible.

**Increase eligibility for marketplace federal subsidies.** Some individuals and families earned too much money to qualify for subsidies but didn’t make enough to afford premiums. Congress could increase access to individual market coverage by increasing eligibility for federal subsidies.

Read about the AMA’s vision for health care reform and its plan to cover the uninsured in 2020 and beyond.

**Learn more:** Physicians recently argued to the Supreme Court that now is the worst time to undo ACA coverage gains.

Stay up to speed on the AMA’s COVID-19 advocacy efforts and track developments with the AMA’s COVID-19 resource center, which offers a library of the most up-to-date resources from JAMA Network™, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the World Health Organization.