



Ron DeKett / HP correspondent

Michael Moyer sits with his family at their Stevensville house. Moyer said the Affordable Care Act proved critical when his wife, Erica, was pregnant with their fourth child, Josephine. The family, from left: Aidan, 11; Michael; Chloe, 6; Blaise, 9; Josephine, 2; and Erica.

Dreading repeal

Affordable Care Act beneficiaries in Southwest Michigan ponder their fates

By **JIM DALGLEISH**

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These are nervous days for some 30,000 people enjoying the Affordable Care Act in Southwest Michigan.

"I'm terrified of the changes," said Kari Molter, a Bainbridge Township farmer dreading the repeal promised by President-elect Donald Trump and Republicans in Congress.

She said the health insurance policy she bought through the federal exchange allowed her to quit a Federal Aviation Administration job and work full time with her husband, Aaron, on the family farm.

"I was really excited. This was the chance I was looking for. ... It gave me peace of mind. It made me feel comfortable about making the leap" into full-time farming, she said

in a phone interview.

Molter said the couple pays \$776 per month for a policy with a \$3,000 deductible. The family income is too high to qualify for a federal subsidy, but she said coverage for the family of four was beyond reach without the exchange.

Greg Rizzo, who moved from St. Joseph to New York City in August, said he paid a \$26 per month premium after sub-

sidies in the ACA's first year. It jumped to \$122 the second year, but was still a bargain.

"I wouldn't have had insurance without that," said Rizzo, a freelance voice-over artist. "I was very grateful."

Michael Moyer, Lake Michigan College's director of enology and viticulture, said ACA proved critical when he had

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J. Scott Applewhite / AP file photo

President Barack Obama signs the health care bill on March 23, 2010, in the East Room of the White House in Washington.

ACA

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a winery job in Washington state that offered no health insurance for his family. His wife had a pre-existing condition: pregnancy.

"We got coverage for the entire pregnancy and the delivery of our baby," Moyer said. He said the coverage saved him thousands of dollars in out-of-pocket expenses.

Gillian Conrad, communications and administrative services manager for the Berrien County Health Department, said her agency is taking many calls from people worried about losing or not being able to secure coverage. The department helps people get access to the private insurance exchanges or the ACA's Medicaid expansion, dubbed Healthy Michigan.

"It's not perfect. There are many holes and flaws in the ACA," she said. "But it would be a real detriment to see this tumble to the ground."

She said the department has secured coverage for those who lost it through job loss and divorce. The ACA extends insurance coverage to adult children to age 26. She said people needing drug and alcohol treatment have been able to secure ACA coverage.

"We see these stories come through our doors every single day," she said.

Repeal would mean more than hardship for ACA beneficiaries, she said. It would undermine the department's public health mission. People with access to care are less likely to spread disease.

"As public health professionals, it is troubling to hear some of Trump's plans to completely repeal these programs," she said.

The big picture

The ACA, also known as Obamacare, has reduced America's uninsured rate from 16.6 percent to 8.6 percent, the lowest mark in U.S. history, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control's National Center for Health Statistics. Similar numbers have

been reported for Southwest Michigan.

An estimated 20 million Americans are enjoying coverage through ACA. The main thrusts are the exchanges and the Medicaid expansion. The numbers would be even greater if 19 states had not rejected Medicaid expansion, which is 90 percent federally funded.

However, the increase in coverage comes with a price.

ACA critics, left and right, agree the program is too expensive and complex – 906 pages of legislation. U.S. taxpayers will spend \$43 billion this year to help people buy private policies on ACA exchanges, according to the Congressional Budget Office. The figure is projected to double by 2022 and reach \$102 billion by 2026.

The Medicaid expansion will cost U.S. taxpayers \$64 billion this year, CBO reported. The figure is projected to double by 2026.

Still, the Medicaid expansion and subsidies totaled represents only about 3 percent of 2016 federal outlays, according to the Office of Management and Budget.

Overall health care costs as a share of U.S. gross domestic product still linger at about 17.5 percent, while the rate is typically about 10 percent in other industrialized nations.

Another ACA shortcoming, critics note, is policies bought through exchanges often have high deductibles.

Critics on the left argue America should adopt the universal coverage models popular elsewhere. Conservative critics say the nation needs more market-based approaches and less government involvement – and they will hold the upper hand in Washington, D.C., after the Jan. 20 presidential inauguration.

Mandates and more

The ACA was a response to concerns about the increasing number of uninsured Americans and how that was driving up costs for everyone else. Furthermore, there was growing public anger with insurance companies dropping clients when they got ill, denying payment for treatments, or denying coverage to those with existing conditions.

There was little will in Congress during the ACA's creation to drive insurance companies out of the health care market. Instead, Congress found them a role – though with limits on dropping clients and rejecting people with existing conditions.

To protect insurers, Congress mandated that all Americans carry health insurance. Otherwise, people would buy policies only after they got ill.

For most working Americans, who have employer-provided insurance, all the ACA does is add a box to their W-2s. But others must buy policies or face tax penalties.

But such policies are prohibitively expensive for middle-class Americans. Thus, the ACA provides subsidies for premiums and deductibles.

Some states set up exchanges. Michigan residents use the federal exchange.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services reported that as of late 2015 sign-ups, there were nearly 11,000 people in Berrien, Van Buren and Cass counties with coverage through the exchanges. The breakdown: Berrien, 6,120; Van Buren, 2,800; and Cass, 1,905. State figures indicate 17,970 people in the region have Medicaid expansion coverage, as of Dec. 27.

Those two ACA programs total 28,975 in Southwest Michigan, and that's not counting adult children added to parents' policies and

those covered through employer mandates.

Government figures show that the uninsured rate has been cut nearly in half in Southwest Michigan since 2013: Berrien, 12.1 to 7.9 percent; Van Buren, 15.6 to 7.5 percent; Cass 11 to 6.1 percent.

Healthy Michigan

The Michigan Legislature in 2013 agreed to the Medicaid expansion and labeled the state's program "Healthy Michigan."

State figures show 10,037 Berrien County residents use the program. The figure is 5,050 in Van Buren County and 2,883 in Cass County. Statewide, it's 642,338.

Congress created Medicaid in the 1960s as a joint federal-state health coverage program for the poor. ACA expanded the program to cover those with annual incomes at 138 percent of the poverty line, or \$33,000 for a family of four.

Recipients are self-employed or in low-wage or part-time jobs with employers who don't offer health insurance. The recipients don't earn enough to buy subsidized insurance on the exchanges.

It's people often called "the working poor," said Conrad of the Berrien health department.

The Republican-led state Legislature adopted Healthy Michigan despite opposition from the tea party movement. Republican Gov. Rick Snyder signed it into law.

State Rep. Al Pscholka, R-Stevensville, said Healthy Michigan saved the state \$750 million in its first three years, with Washington covering 100 percent of the expansion costs. The federal share is now 90 percent.

Pscholka told The Herald-Palladium for a Dec. 28 story that he has received calls from "crying moms" who received a mandatory physical examination under the expansion, found out they had breast cancer and received treatment.

"They said, 'I would have died if it hadn't been for Healthy Michigan.' Try to put a price tag on that."

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