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SB 1289 (Roth): Medi-Cal County Call Centers

SUMMARY

For years, people on Medi-Cal have struggled to reach county eligibility workers by phone due to long wait times and call disconnects. When they cannot get through by phone, they often cannot complete a Medi-Cal application or renewal, reinstate their Medi-Cal, or make other corrections. This bill would require the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) to develop minimum standards for assistance provided by county call centers to Medi-Cal applicants and recipients, and to collect and report county call center data.

PROBLEM

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, people on Medi-Cal had difficulty accessing county eligibility workers by phone, despite state law guaranteeing the right to apply or renew Medi-Cal by phone. Medi-Cal enrollees also need to contact their county workers when something goes wrong with their Medi-Cal, such as when they find out their Medi-Cal is not active.

During COVID-19, many counties had trouble retaining staff, and workforce shortages continue. However, due to federal public health emergency funding requirements, Medi-Cal renewals were suspended until the public health emergency ended. Starting in April 2023, counties were required to begin renewing everyone's Medi-Cal for the first time since 2020. As a result, many people on Medi-Cal have been trying to reach their counties to give information needed to keep their Medi-Cal. People are also calling with new requests to apply for Medi-Cal or to resolve issues with their Medi-Cal coverage. As a result, the already stretched county call center systems are not working at all in some places. People on Medi-Cal and their representatives report hours long waits, automatic disconnects, messages to call back later, phone tree options with dead ends, and callback features that don't call back. The inability for these call centers to handle the call volume they are receiving means that some people lose their Medi-Cal and cannot access health care services even though they are eligible.

Currently, DHCS does not have standards that county call centers must meet in terms of wait times and call abandonment rate, and does not collect this information from counties despite existing federal reporting requirements on call center wait times.

THIS BILL

- Requires DHCS to develop minimum standards for assistance provided by county call centers to Medi-Cal applicants and recipients.
- Requires DHCS to collect and report on county call center data on a quarterly basis.

SPONSORS: Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations, Western Center on Law & Poverty

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