

DAILY NEWS

It's now official: Obamacare here

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WASHINGTON — Obamacare came to New York in earnest yesterday as the state started offering coverage for the uninsured with preexisting medical conditions.

Gov. Paterson said the state is ready to begin accepting applications for the program expected to cut costs by about \$600 monthly per enrollee.

"We welcome this opportunity to offer affordable health insurance to our most vulnerable uninsured New Yorkers," Paterson said.

About 15,000 people in New York are expected to get coverage under the \$5 billion nationwide federal program.

The plan will act as a bridge for folks with preexisting conditions on the way to full implementation

of President Obama's landmark health care reform in 2014.

New York's share of the \$5 billion will come to about \$297 million, state officials said.

The state had expected to start taking applications on Aug. 15, but came in a week late.

"It would've been nice to get it up sooner, but it's a complicated program," said a spokesman for the state Insurance Department.

Currently, an individual with a preexisting condition buying health insurance would pay \$1,000 a month.

The New York Bridge Plan will cost \$421 per month in New York City and downstate counties.

"It's an incredible first step for New Yorkers" to have the bridge plan to 2014 for preexisting conditions, said Elisabeth Benjamin, vice president of health initiatives for the Community Service Society of New York.

"We finally have a product for the sickest and most vulnerable in the state," she added. "It's really a godsend."

At New York's request, Group Health Inc., a subsidiary of EmblemHealth, has been designated as the nonprofit contractor to operate the program for the state.

First Lady Michelle Paterson is an executive at EmblemHealth. The governor said his wife's job played no role in picking the company.

To be eligible, applicants must be legal residents, have one or more preexisting conditions and have been without health care coverage for at least six months. Enrollment is on a first-come, first-served basis.

Additional information is available at (877) 444-9622 or www.nybridgeplan.com.

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