



DAILY NEWS

New Association Will Represent Enrollment Assisters

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Two health advocates formerly with Families USA are rolling out a new trade group that will represent those working to enroll Americans into health coverage. The National Association of Health Access Assisters, which has been in the works for nearly two years, will be officially announced in a teleconference later this month.

The group is still getting its “sea legs,” says Heather Bates, who co-founded the association with former Families USA colleague Elizabeth Hagan. The group recently formed a nine-member volunteer governing board, and also approved the group’s mission statement: “The National Association of Health Access Assisters elevates, advances and advocates for the Health Access Assister profession. The goal is to promote and support the work of our members who help individuals, children and families gain, use, and retain high quality health care and coverage.”

The idea was modeled after a non-profit coverage initiative in California -- California Coverage & Health Initiatives (CCHI) - that has about 40 organizations representing 600 assisters. The group has financial support from a couple of grants and is engaged in “extreme” fundraising, Bates says. It also is working with other associations, including the Get American Covered campaign recently launched by a pair of former Obama officials.

Bates and Hagan said they hope the association will be able to combat the current administration's undermining of the enrollment effort, which has included cutting funds for marketing and navigators.

The lack of support from the administration is a new climate for people who joined the assister community under the Obama administration. As far as the finances for the association, Bates says they've gotten grants and are working on “extreme” fund-raising efforts.

Bates and Hagan also stress that the association has both short-term and long-term goals. For the next open enrollment period, the aim is not to reinvent the wheel, but to do whatever possible to support assisters working on the ground and to help spread the word about enrollment. The group is creating a publication on best practices that will be ready for distribution by Nov. 1. “Our top priority is to make sure we’re sitting at every table and listening to the voices of assisters doing the work each day,” Bates says.

For the long term, the group hope to ensure that those voices are heard. Hagan spent much of her time at Families reading and helping to translate federal regulations and other guidance to the community, and will be doing the same for the new association. The association will also provide comments to regulators on behalf of assisters.

The association will also focus on ways to finance the assister community in the long term, Hagan says. -- *Amy Lotven* (alotven@iwpnews.com)

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