

Following Obamacare, many more in Palm Springs area have health insurance

Barrett Newkirk, The Desert Sun

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(Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

Since the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, new research shows the amount of Coachella Valley adults lacking health insurance has plummeted by more than half.

Roughly one in seven local adults said they lacked health insurance last year, compared to one in three in 2013, according to results released Tuesday by the Palm Desert nonprofit HARC Inc. as part of its triennial community health survey.

The survey found 13.9 percent of locals between the ages of 18 and 64 did not have insurance, "a sharp and significant drop" from the 33.6 percent found in 2013 when HARC last conducted the survey, the agency said in its report on the results.

The information comes as newly sworn-in President Trump and his fellow Republicans in Congress vow to repeal the Affordable Care Act, the law also called Obamacare, and replace it with a yet unknown alternative plan to get more people insured and make health insurance more affordable. Republicans routinely describe the Affordable Care Act as a disaster and a failure because coverage costs have continued to increase and insurers have backed away from state-run insurance exchanges. Still, the law has reduced the national uninsured rate to its lowest point in history.

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HARC's past research shows the local uninsured rate rose from 2007 to 2013 before recently dropping. 2014 was the first year Americans were able to be covered by insurance plans offered under the Affordable Care Act.

The latest survey found that roughly a quarter of insured adults acquire coverage through their jobs, with another quarter enrolling in Medi-Cal, the state insurance plan for low-income residents known as Medicaid in other states. Common reasons adults said they did not have insurance was because they lacked documentation to prove they were legal residents or could not afford the insurance premiums.

The Coachella Valley's uninsured adult population totals about 30,965 people, according to HARC. Americans over 65 are eligible for Medicare.

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Government plans mean children have access to health insurance, but the survey found nearly 5 percent of children, roughly 4,867 individuals, were uninsured. Major reasons given by parents included the loss of Medi-Cal eligibility, the cost of premiums and a change in employment.

HARC, an acronym for Health Assessment and Research for Communities, conducted its survey by phone last year, asking more than 2,500 people questions about health-care access, healthy living habits, diseases and mental health. The agency makes its research available for free online and says local charities have used the data to help secure \$12.8 million in grants over the last five years.

Among the other findings, the HARC survey revealed that a third of valley adults report being sleep deprived and 61 percent are considered overweight or obese.

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