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CONSUMER ALERT

PROTECT YOURSELF AGAINST ILLEGAL HEALTH PLANS

If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. Nationwide, the health insurance marketplace is facing tough times. The cost of health insurance is rising. Those seeking to make a profit by selling fraudulent health insurance claim that state insurance laws don't apply. These entities recruit insurance agents to sell "ERISA plans" or "union plans" that falsely claim to be exempt from state law. Here are some tips from the National Association of Insurance Commissioners (NAIC) to help you protect yourself against illegal health insurance plans.

1. LEGITIMATE ERISA PLANS

Legitimate ERISA plans (plans governed by the federal Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974) and union plans may be exempt from state insurance regulation, which is why criminals try to fool people by making these claims. However, legitimate ERISA or union plans are established by a union for its own members or by an employer for the employer's own employees. They are not sold by insurance agents.

2. GET THE FACTS

Consumers and employers should take care to ask their agents whether the health coverage they are purchasing is fully insured by licensed insurers. A "union plan" sold by an agent, health coverage that seems unusually "cheap," health coverage that is issued with few questions about the applicant's health condition or plan material that refers only to a "stop-loss" insurer should alert a consumer to question the selling agent or contact the state insurance department.

3. HOW THE SCAM WORKS

A typical fraudulent health insurance scam attempts to recruit as many local insurance agents as possible to market the coverage. The health coverage is not approved by the state insurance department. Agents are told it is regulated by federal, not state law. In fact, it is totally illegal. The coverage is typically offered regardless of the applicant's health condition and at lower rates and with better benefits than can be found from licensed insurers. The scam seeks to collect a large amount of premium as rapidly as possible.

While claims may be paid initially, the scam will soon begin to delay payment and offer excuses for failure to pay. Unsuspecting consumers who thought they were covered for their medical needs are left responsible for huge medical bills. Employers may be liable for the medical bills of their employees as well.

4. AVOID BECOMING THE NEXT VICTIM

How can the average consumer avoid becoming the next victim? Ask hard questions and do your homework. Read all materials and scrutinize Web sites carefully. Here are some circumstances and product characteristics that should prompt consumers to question a health plan before purchasing it. These include:

- Coverage that boasts low rates and minimal or no underwriting should be a signal to look deeper.
- Make sure your insurance agent is selling a state-licensed insurance product. If an insurance agent is trying to sell you a union plan, report them to your state insurance department.
- Deal with reputable agents. If the person trying to sell you coverage says he or she doesn't need a license because the coverage isn't insurance or is exempt from regulation, watch out. Contact your state insurance department if you have any questions.
- Ask your agent for the name of the insurer and check the benefit booklet you receive to see whether it names a licensed insurer that is fully insuring the coverage.
- If your agent or the marketing material says that the plan is covered only by "stop-loss" insurance or that the plan is an "ERISA" or "union" plan, contact your state insurance department.

5. GET MORE INFORMATION

Your state insurance department is your best source for information on company and agent licensing requirements, as well as available products. You can link to your insurance department's Web site through the NAIC at www.naic.org. Click on "State Insurance Web Sites," then click on your state.

The National Association of Insurance Commissioners is a voluntary organization of the chief insurance regulatory officials of the 50 states, the District of Columbia and four U.S. territories. The overriding objectives of state regulators are to protect consumers and help maintain the financial stability of the insurance industry. If you would like more information, please contact the NAIC Communications Department at (816) 842-3600 or send e-mail to communications@naic.org.