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## NY health firm agrees to disclose data on rates

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — New York's largest health insurance company agreed Tuesday to publicly disclose more data used to justify premium increases.

The agreement with UnitedHealth Group is part of a statewide effort by state Financial Services Superintendent Benjamin Lawsky to make rate increase filings public for review by policy holders and consumer advocates. That could result in reducing the number of requested hikes and provide a better chance for consumers to challenge the requests.

Lawsky is now seeking greater disclosure from all companies operating in the state.

"We got here and said, 'This is crazy,'" Lawsky told The Associated Press. "We are supposed to be getting comment from consumers and they don't understand what's in the filing.

"My hope is this will create a race to the top where other insurers in the industry will follow United's lead," said Lawsky, a former federal prosecutor who was confirmed for the position in May. "It shouldn't be a state secret. This is the setting of health insurance rates, which is incredibly important to millions of New York consumers, and they deserve to know."

The New York Public Interest Research Group said the agreement could lead to greater competition for price and "points the way to a paradigm shift in setting insurance rates of all types."

"This is a big win for health care consumers and for transparency in government," NYPIRG's Russ Haven said. "The regulation of insurance rates historically has been a black hole."

A law passed in 2010 aimed at restricting health care increases requires insurers to seek the prior approval of the Department of Financial Services for certain health insurance rate increases.

The insurers must use data to support their request, which the state has, until now, kept confidential at the companies' request.

"We believe consumers need to understand the elements that are driving increased health care costs — and as a result, their premiums — and our mutually agreed-upon decision will provide consumers with access to more detailed health information," said Daryl Richard, vice president of public relations at UnitedHealthcare, the insurance arm of UnitedHealth.

Lawsky determined in September that all companies' filings should be public to allow for more informed comments and challenges in public hearings. Ten companies made formal objections, including UnitedHealth. On Oct. 19, the department rejected their arguments.

The companies may still appeal.

Rate application filings include spending on medical claims, projected claims, administrative expenses and profits, and benefit changes.

Lawsky said the insurers still objecting to the disclosure are Aetna Health, Capital District Physicians' Health Plan, Connecticut General Life Insurance Company, EmblemHealth, Empire HealthChoice, Excellus Health Plan, HealthNow New York, BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York and BlueShield of Northeastern New York, Independent Health, MVP Health Care and the New York Health Plan Association.

Elisabeth Benjamin of Health Initiatives at the Community Service Society of NY called the decision "an important vindication for New York's health insurance consumers and small businesses."

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