

FAIR HEALTH PRICES

WASHINGTON

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WASHINGTON SURVEY SHOWS RESIDENTS STRUGGLE WITH HEALTH CARE COSTS

Reveals widespread bipartisan support for legislative action.

SEATTLE, WA-A new statewide [survey](#) of Washingtonians shows more than half did not get the medical care they needed in the last year because of cost. President of the Washington State Nurses Association and urgent care nurse practitioner Justin Gill says he has a front row seat to the impact of the rising cost of health care. "On almost every shift, I see patients who have avoided accessing the health care system because of skyrocketing costs. By foregoing diagnostic tests or missing medications, patients often have more consequential and expensive complications that further fuel the cycle of skyrocketing costs."

More than half of respondents were forced to use money from their food, heat, and housing budgets, deplete all or most of their savings, or struggle to pay for basic necessities in order to pay health care bills. More than four in ten reported having to go on a payment plan, use a credit card, or take out a loan in order to pay for medical treatment. "These results confirm what we've long known. Washingtonians can't afford their health care," said Jim Freeburg, Executive Director of Patient Coalition of Washington. "No one should avoid getting care because they are afraid of the cost or worse, living in fear of getting sick. We can't just keep talking about high health care costs and their devastating effects. It's time to act."

Of those surveyed, three in ten said they currently have an unpaid medical bill and twice that number, six in ten, said they could not pay or would struggle to pay an unexpected \$500 medical expense. "There is a reason why one in three people in Washington reported having medical debt," says Sam Hatzenbeler, Senior Policy Associate at the Economic Opportunity Institute. "It's because we let hospitals, insurance companies, and drug makers charge whatever they want. This leaves patients stuck having to pay the price, no matter how high it is."

Small businesses are particularly hard hit by high health care costs. A 2023 [survey](#) of 65 Washington small business owners by Small Business for America's Future showed almost all, 97%, experienced increased health insurance premiums, with nearly one in three facing a 15% hike or more. More than half of those surveyed do not provide health insurance to their employees and many (56%) say cost is the main reason. John Godfrey, Washington CAN Program Manager and co-owner of Baas Framing Studio, has seen the impact of high premiums. "This year alone, the cost of our premiums increased 19%. This is unsustainable and

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makes it impossible for most small businesses that simply cannot afford out-of-control health care costs and are struggling to survive.”

The Washington State Health Care Cost Transparency Board is charged with understanding where our health care dollars are going and setting a limit on how quickly spending inflates. A broad coalition of patient groups, business groups, and labor unions submitted a letter earlier this week, calling on the Board to focus on mechanisms that can “rapidly stabilize or lower expenditures for Washington consumers, businesses, and the state.” They recommended that the Board increase accountability of providers and insurers that repeatedly exceed the state’s targets, examine the effects of consolidations on the health care system, and consider solutions on how to address price variation. The letter highlighted recent [data](#) from the Washington Health Alliance, which showed that on average, Washingtonians with commercial insurance pay nearly 3 times more for hospital care than what the federal government has determined is a fair price for Medicare.

Three out of four of the survey respondents said they are concerned about their ability to afford the out-of-pocket costs related to getting care in a hospital, whether planned or emergency treatment. Of those who report having medical debt, four in ten reported that hospital care is responsible for the largest share. “We need to get to the bottom of what’s a fair price for health care,” said Emily Brice, Deputy Director of Northwest Health Law Advocates. “Everyone cares about having health care in their communities, but when some hospitals are charging us up to 7 times what Medicare pays while many struggle to get even the most basic health care, we need to ask why we let this continue.”

A new [report](#) from the Washington State Insurance Commissioner, released today, describes state policy options to improve affordability and access. That’s good news for the nine out of ten survey respondents who said they are worried about the cost of health care in the future. While eight out of ten believe the state’s health care system needs to change, six in ten said they do not believe the health care industry itself can be trusted to regulate health care costs. When considering top priorities for elected officials, health care affordability was ranked third highest, tied with crime, and behind only inflation and housing affordability. The overwhelming majority of those surveyed said Washington state elected officials and lawmakers should take action to address health care costs and that support cut across party lines with agreement from 89% of Democrats, 87% of Independents, and 86% of Republicans.

[Fair Health Prices Washington](#) is a partnership of patient groups, nonprofit consumer advocacy organizations, business leaders, and labor unions working together to make health care more affordable using a range of proven policy solutions. The survey of 1,006 Washington residents was conducted online from June 13 to June 27, 2024 by Digital Research, Inc. and was supported by United States of Care, a nonpartisan health care advocacy group, and West Health.

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