RCW 48.21.045 Health plan benefits for small employers—Coverage—Exemption from statutory requirements—Premium rates—Requirements for providing coverage for small employers—Definitions. (1)(a) An insurer offering any health benefit plan to a small employer, either directly or through an association or member-governed group formed specifically for the purpose of purchasing health care, may offer and actively market to the small employer a health benefit plan featuring a limited schedule of covered health care services. Nothing in this subsection shall preclude an insurer from offering, or a small employer from purchasing, other health benefit plans that may have more comprehensive benefits than those included in the product offered under this subsection. An insurer offering a health benefit plan under this subsection shall clearly disclose all covered benefits to the small employer in a brochure filed with the commissioner.

(b) A health benefit plan offered under this subsection shall provide coverage for hospital expenses and services rendered by a physician licensed under chapter 18.57 or 18.71 RCW but is not subject to the requirements of RCW 48.21.130, 48.21.140, 48.21.141, 48.21.142, 48.21.144, 48.21.146, 48.21.160 through 48.21.197, 48.21.200, 48.21.220, 48.21.225, 48.21.230, 48.21.235, 48.21.244, 48.21.250, 48.21.300, 48.21.310, or 48.21.320.

(2) Nothing in this section shall prohibit an insurer from offering, or a purchaser from seeking, health benefit plans with benefits in excess of the health benefit plan offered under subsection (1) of this section. All forms, policies, and contracts shall be submitted for approval to the commissioner, and the rates of any plan offered under this section shall be reasonable in relation to the benefits thereto.

(3) Premium rates for health benefit plans for small employers as defined in this section shall be subject to the following provisions:

(a) The insurer shall develop its rates based on an adjusted community rate and may only vary the adjusted community rate for:

(i) Geographic area;

(ii) Family size;

(iii) Age; and

(iv) Wellness activities.

(b) The adjustment for age in (a)(iii) of this subsection may not use age brackets smaller than five-year increments, which shall begin with age twenty and end with age sixty-five. Employees under the age of twenty shall be treated as those age twenty.

(c) The insurer shall be permitted to develop separate rates for individuals age sixty-five or older for coverage for which medicare is the primary payer and coverage for which medicare is not the primary payer. Both rates shall be subject to the requirements of this subsection (3).

(d) The permitted rates for any age group shall be no more than four hundred twenty-five percent of the lowest rate for all age groups on January 1, 1996, four hundred percent on January 1, 1997, and three hundred seventy-five percent on January 1, 2000, and thereafter.

(e) A discount for wellness activities shall be permitted to reflect actuarially justified differences in utilization or cost attributed to such programs. Up to a twenty percent variance may be allowed for small employers that develop and implement a wellness program or activities that directly improve employee wellness. Employers shall document program activities with the carrier and may, after three years of implementation, request a reduction in premiums

based on improved employee health and wellness. While carriers may review the employer's claim history when making a determination regarding whether the employer's wellness program has improved employee health, the carrier may not use maternity or prevention services claims to deny the employer's request. Carriers may consider issues such as improved productivity or a reduction in absenteeism due to illness if submitted by the employer for consideration. Interested employers may also work with the carrier to develop a wellness program and a means to track improved employee health.

(f) The rate charged for a health benefit plan offered under this section may not be adjusted more frequently than annually except that the premium may be changed to reflect:

(i) Changes to the enrollment of the small employer;

(ii) Changes to the family composition of the employee;

(iii) Changes to the health benefit plan requested by the small employer; or

(iv) Changes in government requirements affecting the health benefit plan.

(g) On the census date, as defined in RCW 48.21.047, rating factors shall produce premiums for identical groups that differ only by the amounts attributable to plan design, and differences in census date between new and renewal groups, with the exception of discounts for health improvement programs.

(h) For the purposes of this section, a health benefit plan that contains a restricted network provision shall not be considered similar coverage to a health benefit plan that does not contain such a provision, provided that the restrictions of benefits to network providers result in substantial differences in claims costs. A carrier may develop its rates based on claims costs due to network provider reimbursement schedules or type of network. This subsection does not restrict or enhance the portability of benefits as provided in *RCW 48.43.015.

(i) Adjusted community rates established under this section shall pool the medical experience of all small groups purchasing coverage, including the small group participants in the health insurance partnership established in **RCW 70.47A.030. However, annual rate adjustments for each small group health benefit plan may vary by up to plus or minus four percentage points from the overall adjustment of a carrier's entire small group pool, such overall adjustment to be approved by the commissioner, upon a showing by the carrier, certified by a member of the American academy of actuaries that: (i) The variation is a result of deductible leverage, benefit design, or provider network characteristics; and (ii) for a rate renewal period, the projected weighted average of all small group benefit plans will have a revenue neutral effect on the carrier's small group pool. Variations of greater than four percentage points are subject to review by the commissioner, and must be approved or denied within sixty days of submittal. A variation that is not denied within sixty days shall be deemed approved. The commissioner must provide to the carrier a detailed actuarial justification for any denial within thirty days of the denial.

(j) For health benefit plans purchased through the health insurance partnership established in **chapter 70.47A RCW:

(i) Any surcharge established pursuant to **RCW 70.47A.030(2)(e) shall be applied only to health benefit plans purchased through the health insurance partnership; and

(ii) Risk adjustment or reinsurance mechanisms may be used by the health insurance partnership program to redistribute funds to carriers participating in the health insurance partnership based on differences in risk attributable to individual choice of health plans or other factors unique to health insurance partnership participation. Use of such mechanisms shall be limited to the partnership program and will not affect small group health plans offered outside the partnership.

(k) If the rate developed under this section varies the adjusted community rate for the factors listed in (a) of this subsection, the date for determining those factors must be no more than ninety days prior to the effective date of the health benefit plan.

(4) Nothing in this section shall restrict the right of employees to collectively bargain for insurance providing benefits in excess of those provided herein.

(5)(a) Except as provided in this subsection and subsection (3)(g) of this section, requirements used by an insurer in determining whether to provide coverage to a small employer shall be applied uniformly among all small employers applying for coverage or receiving coverage from the carrier.

(b) An insurer shall not require a minimum participation level greater than:

(i) One hundred percent of eligible employees working for groups with three or less employees; and

(ii) Seventy-five percent of eligible employees working for groups with more than three employees.

(c) In applying minimum participation requirements with respect to a small employer, a small employer shall not consider employees or dependents who have similar existing coverage in determining whether the applicable percentage of participation is met.

(d) An insurer may not increase any requirement for minimum employee participation or modify any requirement for minimum employer contribution applicable to a small employer at any time after the small employer has been accepted for coverage.

(e) Minimum participation requirements and employer premium contribution requirements adopted by the health insurance partnership board under **RCW 70.47A.110 shall apply only to the employers and employees who purchase health benefit plans through the health insurance partnership.

(6) An insurer must offer coverage to all eligible employees of a small employer and their dependents. An insurer may not offer coverage to only certain individuals or dependents in a small employer group or to only part of the group. An insurer may not modify a health plan with respect to a small employer or any eligible employee or dependent, through riders, endorsements or otherwise, to restrict or exclude coverage or benefits for specific diseases, medical conditions, or services otherwise covered by the plan.

(7) As used in this section, "health benefit plan," "small employer," "adjusted community rate," and "wellness activities" mean the same as defined in RCW 48.43.005. [2010 c 292 s 7; 2009 c 131 s 1; 2008 c 143 s 6; 2007 c 260 s 7; 2004 c 244 s 1; 1995 c 265 s 14; 1990 c 187 s 2.]

Reviser's note: *(1) RCW 48.43.015 was repealed by 2019 c 33 s 7.

**(2) Chapter 70.47A RCW was repealed in its entirety by 2017 3rd sp.s. c 25 s 9.

Application—2010 c 292: See note following RCW 48.43.005.

Application—2004 c 244: "Sections 1 through 15 of this act apply to all small group health benefit plans issued or renewed on or after June 10, 2004." [2004 c 244 s 17.]

Captions not law—Effective dates—Savings—Severability—1995 c 265: See notes following RCW 70.47.015.

Finding—Intent—1990 c 187: "The legislature finds that the rising cost of comprehensive group health coverage is exceeding the affordability of many small businesses and their employees. The legislature further finds that certain public policies have an adverse impact on the cost of such coverage. It is therefore the intent of the legislature to reduce costs by authorizing the development of basic hospital and medical coverage for small groups." [1990 c 187 s 1.]

Severability—1990 c 187: "If any provision of this act or its application to any person or circumstance is held invalid, the remainder of the act or the application of the provision to other persons or circumstances is not affected." [1990 c 187 s 6.]