

# Penalties proposed for lack of health insurance

■ A state official urges the loss of a driver's license or even college football tickets.

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Oklahomans without health insurance could lose their driver's licenses, state income tax deductions or even college football season tickets under a surprising approach proposed by state Insurance Commissioner Kim Holland.

Such penalties might help Oklahoma improve its dismal ranking in the number of residents who have no health insurance, Holland said this

week during her agency's Summit on the High Cost of Health Insurance.

"None of those are very pleasant, but there needs to be a consequence," Holland said Thursday. "We have developed this culture over the years that some don't feel like they have to pay their medical bills and it's going to take us a while to overcome that, and it's going to be painful."

The idea has an obvious po-

tential for problems, including unfairly targeting a large group of people who can't afford to buy medical coverage, consumer advocates say.

A survey this year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that one-third of Oklahomans have no health coverage, the highest rate of uninsured residents in the nation.

A telephone survey released by the Oklahoma Health Care Authority found that about 16.7 percent of Oklahomans or 579,036 residents lack health insurance.

Uncompensated medical coverage in Oklahoma totals nearly \$1 billion, Holland said.

Although there might be some merit to targeting Oklahomans who are paid enough money to afford health insurance but choose not to, policy makers must avoid penalizing those who can't afford or can't qualify for insurance, said Jeff Raymond, director of the nonprofit advocacy group Oklahoma Foundation for Consumer and Patients Rights.

"I think taking away a driv-

er's license for this is probably too draconian," he said.

"You have to look at why people don't have insurance, and in some cases it's a choice, but in other cases it's a lot more complicated than that."

State Rep. Kris Steele, R-Shawnee, co-chairman of the House Health Care Reform Task Force, said requiring Oklahomans to buy health insurance is not a popular stance among lawmakers but that he is not opposed to mandated incentives.

"I believe the place to

**579,036**

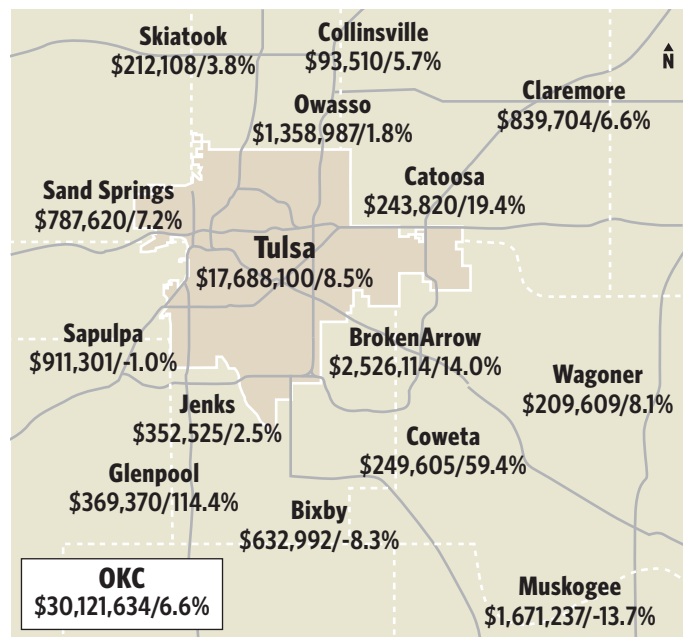
■ Number of Oklahomans who don't have health insurance.

start is to create a situation within our state that people are without excuse for not having health insurance," he said. "Once we get to the point where people are without excuse, then we create the incentives."

"You need the carrot and the stick," Steele said.

## Area sales tax revenues

November 2008 sales tax deposits/percent change from previous year



Source: Oklahoma Tax Commission

Tulsa World

## REVENUE:

Tulsa is about 4.1 percent, or \$3.6 million, ahead of budget for the fiscal year.

FROM A11

Mayor Kathy Taylor has said she wants to be ready for whatever comes and that the city is being conservative with hiring and spending.

So far, Tulsa is about 4.1 percent, or \$3.6 million, ahead of budget for the fiscal year, offering some cushion, Connelly said.

"We have projected some very strong numbers for the Christmas shopping season that we would see in January and February," he said. "If those don't materialize, the overcollections in our early months could be wiped out."

This month's check from the Oklahoma Tax Commission was for \$17,688,100, compared with \$16,298,521 for November

2007. The money was collected between Sept. 16 and Oct. 15.

The strength of the increase is at least in part a result of higher utility billings and the opening of the BOK Center, Connelly said.

"The arena has definitely created an inflow of dollars that would not have been realized otherwise," he said.

Many communities in the Tulsa area saw minimal increases or drops in retail revenues for November.

Two notable exceptions are Glenpool, which saw a 114.4 percent increase, and Coweta, which saw revenues rise by 59.4 percent.

Officials from both towns have said the extra money has come from the recent openings of Wal-Mart Supercenters and other commercial development.

Muskogee's 13.7 percent revenue drop is the result of a three-quarter-cent decrease in its sales-tax rate since last year.

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## Volunteer to deliver cards to Iraq

■ The McAlester resident wants to make the holidays merry for troops, too.



Patricia Blankenship of McAlester holds some of the cards she is collecting to hand out to troops in Iraq this holiday season. Blankenship, a former U.S. Postal Service employee, begins her six-month deployment as a volunteer worker at an air base in Iraq on Dec. 1. KEVIN HARVISON/McAlester News-Capital/AP

MALESTER (AP) — Patricia Blankenship delivered mail for more than 18 years before she switched jobs to work at the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant.

She hopes to combine those roles this Christmas while deployed to Iraq. The McAlester resident said she is spending six months overseas on a volunteer staffing mission at an air base. Her deployment begins Dec. 1.

"Since I'll be there during Christmas, I was thinking what I could do to bring a few smiles to people's faces," she said.

Christmas cards from home is what she came up with.

"Since cards don't weigh much and don't cost much, I thought I could just pass them out to the troops I see," she said.

Blankenship hopes that residents and fellow workers will be moved to write a card or two to inspire deployed troops who can't come home for the holidays.

"There are thousands who won't be here for Christmas," she said. "They are still over there needing our love, our prayers. They need to know people are still thinking of

them."

Blankenship delivered mail for the U.S. Postal Service in Oklahoma City, McAlester and Wilburton. She went to work at the ammunition plant four years ago, where she drives a forklift.

She's not sure exactly what her assignment will be in Iraq, but she doesn't much care as long as she can help

"The reason I volunteer is — how did I tell the colonel this? — is because I'm in love with our military," she said. "I have this opportunity I can go help. And six months of my time is nothing compared to what they're doing."

Blankenship said the deployment is part of a rotation in which about two dozen ammunition plant employees are overseas at a given time helping a short-staffed military.

"I will be working side by side with our men and women in arms," she said. "I just think it's a great opportunity to do something."

Blankenship hopes to have something to give those men and women when Christmas rolls around.

"If I had a bunch of Christmas cards, I could just say merry Christmas from someone in McAlester," she said.

"Sit down and write a little message inside," she urges. "Anything. Just whatever message you would like to tell a soldier. 'We're praying for you. We haven't forgot you. Merry Christmas!'"

## DRUG:

The drug-kingpin law is used in cases of alleged "continuing criminal enterprise."

FROM A11

and distributed, according to the indictment.

Saenz was not among the 11 people charged in the original version of the indictment, which was issued under seal March 6. Those charges were made public

March 31.

On that date, U.S. Attorney David O'Meilia said the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force investigation, called Operation Icepack, had spanned more than two years.

In that version of the indictment, brothers Manuel Bonilla, 37, and Mario Bonilla, 24, were charged under the federal drug-kingpin statute.

That law, used when a "continuing criminal enterprise" is alleged, pertains to defendants who purportedly occupied a management role in a drug-trafficking organization involving at least five people who allegedly

engaged in a series of felonies and made a substantial profit.

Those convicted under the statute face at least 20 years in prison, Litchfield said.

Saenz is accused in the most recent version of the indictment — filed Oct. 14 — of also occupying a leadership role in the plot.

Litchfield said Saenz, who was captured Oct. 23 at the El Paso border crossing, is believed to have been above the Bonillas in the organization's command structure.

A forfeiture count seeks \$1.5 million in alleged drug proceeds from Saenz and other defendants.

Manuel Bonilla is one of

two defendants who Litchfield said are still unaccounted for and evidently in Mexico.

Several of the defendants who faced lesser charges in the case have pleaded guilty, court records show.

Involved in the investigation were the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; the Internal Revenue Service's Criminal Investigation Division; the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency; the Drug Enforcement Administration; and the Tulsa Police Department.

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## APPEAL:

Hall says her group "is preparing for the worst but hoping for the best."

FROM A11

tration, and eliminating from the 76-unit facility 25 units that would be used for the Safe Haven program, which is a transitional living space for chronically homeless and mentally ill people.

Hall said the group could keep the issue in court until after the downtown YMCA residential program closes in January 2010 because of fire-code regulations, forcing organizations to find another site to house some of those residents.

She called the strategy "an option of last resort."

"We are preparing for the worst but hoping for the best," she said. "We are certainly still open to negotiate."

Mike Brose, executive director of the Mental Health Association in Tulsa, said finding another site is "not an option."

"If we don't have something in place to replace (the downtown YMCA) housing in an affordable way, the community will have a significant issue on its hands," he said.

Brose stated in a written release that Tulsa "cannot give in to the fears that would bar people with mental illness and those who have been homeless from having a home in which to live."

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