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Published on *WBEZ 91.5 Chicago* (<http://www.wbez.org>)

Source URL: <http://www.wbez.org/news/adjunct-professors-demand-inclusion-health-care-reforms-106034>

## Adjunct professors demand inclusion in health care reforms

March 11, 2013

Starting in January 2014, large employers will be required to give health benefits to people who work at least 30 hours a week. The provision of the federal Affordable Care Act applies to anyone with more than 50 full-time employees – including all of Illinois' community colleges.

Now some adjunct professors are worried they'll have their hours cut by colleges who don't want to shell out the cash come January.

Dennis Polkow joined a group of protesters Friday outside the Westin Hotel, where Illinois community college leaders were holding a weekend gathering. After working at Oakton Community College for 13 years, he's teaching 3 classes this semester and making less than 12 thousand dollars, he says, with no benefits. Like many other adjuncts, Polkow often juggles jobs at several colleges to make ends meet.

He said when he heard about the health care bill, "I thought, hallelujah, affordable health care act. I'll be able to get affordable health care. Instead it's like...cut, cut, cut, cut, cut."

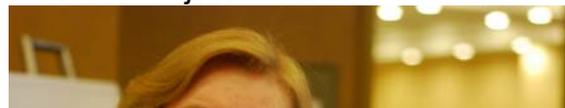
Polkow's one of the people who'd be covered under Obamacare. But this February he found out Oakton may limit adjunct course loads in preparation for the health care law to kick in.

The college caught flack from faculty over memos that circulated about limiting adjunct course hours, and now Oakton Community College President Peg Lee says nothing's been decided.

"We don't even know how to define the number of hours," she said Friday.

Adjuncts are paid by the course hour rather than by hours worked, and federal guidelines for calculating who will get coverage are still under review. Lee says whatever the calculations, community colleges are already strapped for cash. Governor Quinn's 2014 budget slashes higher education by five percent, and Lee says Oakton's still waiting on state reimbursement checks from last year. Sequestration cuts could also limit the numbers of students bringing federal aid into the community college system.

"As much as I believe in universal health care and a single payer, we can't be that universal health care and single payer provider," Lee said. "We just don't have the money."



visited on 11/21/2014

It's unclear whether most community colleges will adopt the practice of cutting adjunct hours to avoid Obamacare costs.

"We're learning what the rules are and how they impact employees and employers, and the decisions that need to be made," said Mike Monaghan, director of the Illinois Community College Trustees Association. "We have lots more work to do."



Still, he said the adjuncts' concerns are legitimate.

"Everybody has reason to be concerned, whether you're an employee or an employer," Monaghan said. "Any additional expense puts pressure on declining budgets."

Cuts are already in place at Joliet Junior College (JJC). In anticipation of the health care reforms, the administration has placed a cap of six course hours per semester on all adjuncts' schedules beginning this summer. At the protest Friday, JJC adjuncts' union president Al Kennedy spoke quietly but urgently about the effect of the cuts on some union members.

"Are they going to be able to pay their rent for their apartment? Are they gonna be able to put food on the table for the kids? They're just beside themselves," he said.

JJC stands by the decision, saying that planning for a law they still have so little information about is a balancing act.



"I think this is just one of the sort of byproducts of this law," said JJC spokesperson Kelly Rohder.

But to protester Steven Brody, also an Oakton adjunct, this is about more than a fight over health care.

"This is simply the first reaction of every one of these colleges to having to finally come to grips with the fact that they overutilize and underpay their adjunct faculty," he said.

A recent study found that three quarters of college classes nationwide are taught by part-time or adjunct instructors, a dramatic shift from the 1970s when the majority of classes were taught by tenured faculty. Average pay for adjunct professors adds up to just over \$20,000 a year for eight courses total, and most of the positions don't come with health insurance.

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