

TITLE III – HEALTH INSURANCE ASSISTANCE

A. Assistance for COBRA Continuation Coverage (sec. 3002(a) of the House bill, sec. 3001 of the Senate amendment, sec. 3001 of the conference agreement, and sec. 4980B and new secs. 139C, 6432, and 6720C of the Code)

Present Law

In general

The Code contains rules that require certain group health plans to offer certain individuals (“qualified beneficiaries”) the opportunity to continue to participate for a specified period of time in the group health plan (“continuation coverage”) after the occurrence of certain events that otherwise would have terminated such participation (“qualifying events”).²²⁸ These continuation coverage rules are often referred to as “COBRA continuation coverage” or “COBRA,” which is a reference to the acronym for the law that added the continuation coverage rules to the Code.²²⁹

The Code imposes an excise tax on a group health plan if it fails to comply with the COBRA continuation coverage rules with respect to a qualified beneficiary. The excise tax with respect to a qualified beneficiary generally is equal to \$100 for each day in the noncompliance period with respect to the failure. A plan’s noncompliance period generally begins on the date the failure first occurs and ends when the failure is corrected. Special rules apply that limit the amount of the excise tax if the failure would not have been discovered despite the exercise of reasonable diligence or if the failure is due to reasonable cause and not willful neglect.

In the case of a multiemployer plan, the excise tax generally is imposed on the group health plan. A multiemployer plan is a plan to which more than one employer is required to contribute, that is maintained pursuant to one or more collective bargaining agreements between one or more employee organizations and more than one employer, and that satisfies such other requirements as the Secretary of Labor may prescribe by regulation. In the case of a plan other than a multiemployer plan (a “single employer plan”), the excise tax generally is imposed on the employer.

Plans subject to COBRA

A group health plan is defined as a plan of, or contributed to by, an employer (including a self-employed person) or employee organization to provide health care (directly or otherwise) to

²²⁸ Sec. 4980B.

²²⁹ The COBRA rules were added to the Code by the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985, Pub. L. No. 99-272. The rules were originally added as Code sections 162(i) and (k). The rules were later restated as Code section 4980B, pursuant to the Technical and Miscellaneous Revenue Act of 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-647.

the employees, former employees, the employer, and others associated or formerly associated with the employer in a business relationship, or their families. A group health plan includes a self-insured plan. The term group health plan does not, however, include a plan under which substantially all of the coverage is for qualified long-term care services.

The following types of group health plans are not subject to the Code's COBRA rules: (1) a plan established and maintained for its employees by a church or by a convention or association of churches which is exempt from tax under section 501 (a "church plan"); (2) a plan established and maintained for its employees by the Federal government, the government of any State or political subdivision thereof, or by any instrumentality of the foregoing (a "governmental plan");²³⁰ and (3) a plan maintained by an employer that normally employed fewer than 20 employees on a typical business day during the preceding calendar year²³¹ (a "small employer plan").

Qualifying events and qualified beneficiaries

A qualifying event that gives rise to COBRA continuation coverage includes, with respect to any covered employee, the following events which would result in a loss of coverage of a qualified beneficiary under a group health plan (but for COBRA continuation coverage): (1) death of the covered employee; (2) the termination (other than by reason of such employee's gross misconduct), or a reduction in hours, of the covered employee's employment; (3) divorce or legal separation of the covered employee; (4) the covered employee becoming entitled to Medicare benefits under title XVIII of the Social Security Act; (5) a dependent child ceasing to be a dependent child under the generally applicable requirements of the plan; and (6) a proceeding in a case under the U.S. Bankruptcy Code commencing on or after July 1, 1986, with respect to the employer from whose employment the covered employee retired at any time.

A "covered employee" is an individual who is (or was) provided coverage under the group health plan on account of the performance of services by the individual for one or more persons maintaining the plan and includes a self-employed individual. A "qualified beneficiary" means, with respect to a covered employee, any individual who on the day before the qualifying event for the employee is a beneficiary under the group health plan as the spouse or dependent child of the employee. The term qualified beneficiary also includes the covered employee in the case of a qualifying event that is a termination of employment or reduction in hours.

Continuation coverage requirements

Continuation coverage that must be offered to qualified beneficiaries pursuant to COBRA must consist of coverage which, as of the time coverage is being provided, is identical to the coverage provided under the plan to similarly situated non-COBRA beneficiaries under the plan with respect to whom a qualifying event has not occurred. If coverage under a plan is modified

²³⁰ A governmental plan also includes certain plans established by an Indian tribal government.

²³¹ If the plan is a multiemployer plan, then each of the employers contributing to the plan for a calendar year must normally employ fewer than 20 employees during the preceding calendar year.

for any group of similarly situated non-COBRA beneficiaries, the coverage must also be modified in the same manner for qualified beneficiaries. Similarly situated non-COBRA beneficiaries means the group of covered employees, spouses of covered employees, or dependent children of covered employees who (i) are receiving coverage under the group health plan for a reason other than pursuant to COBRA, and (ii) are the most similarly situated to the situation of the qualified beneficiary immediately before the qualifying event, based on all of the facts and circumstances.

The maximum required period of continuation coverage for a qualified beneficiary (i.e., the minimum period for which continuation coverage must be offered) depends upon a number of factors, including the specific qualifying event that gives rise to a qualified beneficiary's right to elect continuation coverage. In the case of a qualifying event that is the termination, or reduction of hours, of a covered employee's employment, the minimum period of coverage that must be offered to the qualified beneficiary is coverage for the period beginning with the loss of coverage on account of the qualifying event and ending on the date that is 18 months²³² after the date of the qualifying event. If coverage under a plan is lost on account of a qualifying event but the loss of coverage actually occurs at a later date, the minimum coverage period may be extended by the plan so that it is measured from the date when coverage is actually lost.

The minimum coverage period for a qualified beneficiary generally ends upon the earliest to occur of the following events: (1) the date on which the employer ceases to provide any group health plan to any employee, (2) the date on which coverage ceases under the plan by reason of a failure to make timely payment of any premium required with respect to the qualified beneficiary, and (3) the date on which the qualified beneficiary first becomes (after the date of election of continuation coverage) either (i) covered under any other group health plan (as an employee or otherwise) which does not include any exclusion or limitation with respect to any preexisting condition of such beneficiary or (ii) entitled to Medicare benefits under title XVIII of the Social Security Act. Mere eligibility for another group health plan or Medicare benefits is not sufficient to terminate the minimum coverage period. Instead, the qualified beneficiary must be actually covered by the other group health plan or enrolled in Medicare. Coverage under another group health plan or enrollment in Medicare does not terminate the minimum coverage period if such other coverage or Medicare enrollment begins on or before the date that continuation coverage is elected.

Election of continuation coverage

The COBRA rules specify a minimum election period under which a qualified beneficiary is entitled to elect continuation coverage. The election period begins not later than the date on which coverage under the plan terminates on account of the qualifying event, and ends not earlier than the later of 60 days or 60 days after notice is given to the qualified beneficiary of the qualifying event and the beneficiary's election rights.

²³² In the case of a qualified beneficiary who is determined, under Title II or XVI of the Social Security Act, to have been disabled during the first 60 days of continuation coverage, the 18 month minimum coverage period is extended to 29 months with respect to all qualified beneficiaries if notice is given before the end of the initial 18 month continuation coverage period.

Notice requirements

A group health plan is required to give a general notice of COBRA continuation coverage rights to employees and their spouses at the time of enrollment in the group health plan.

An employer is required to give notice to the plan administrator of certain qualifying events (including a loss of coverage on account of a termination of employment or reduction in hours) generally within 30 days of the qualifying event. A covered employee or qualified beneficiary is required to give notice to the plan administrator of certain qualifying events within 60 days after the event. The qualifying events giving rise to an employee or beneficiary notification requirement are the divorce or legal separation of the covered employee or a dependent child ceasing to be a dependent child under the terms of the plan. Upon receiving notice of a qualifying event from the employer, covered employee, or qualified beneficiary, the plan administrator is then required to give notice of COBRA continuation coverage rights within 14 days to all qualified beneficiaries with respect to the event.

Premiums

A plan may require payment of a premium for any period of continuation coverage. The amount of such premium generally may not exceed 102 percent²³³ of the "applicable premium" for such period and the premium must be payable, at the election of the payor, in monthly installments.

The applicable premium for any period of continuation coverage means the cost to the plan for such period of coverage for similarly situated non-COBRA beneficiaries with respect to whom a qualifying event has not occurred, and is determined without regard to whether the cost is paid by the employer or employee. The determination of any applicable premium is made for a period of 12 months (the "determination period") and is required to be made before the beginning of such 12 month period.

In the case of a self-insured plan, the applicable premium for any period of continuation coverage of qualified beneficiaries is equal to a reasonable estimate of the cost of providing coverage during such period for similarly situated non-COBRA beneficiaries which is determined on an actuarial basis and takes into account such factors as the Secretary of Treasury prescribes in regulations. A self-insured plan may elect to determine the applicable premium on the basis of an adjusted cost to the plan for similarly situated non-COBRA beneficiaries during the preceding determination period.

A plan may not require payment of any premium before the day which is 45 days after the date on which the qualified beneficiary made the initial election for continuation coverage. A plan is required to treat any required premium payment as timely if it is made within 30 days after the date the premium is due or within such longer period as applies to, or under, the plan.

²³³ In the case of a qualified beneficiary whose minimum coverage period is extended to 29 months on account of a disability determination, the premium for the period of the disability extension may not exceed 150 percent of the applicable premium for the period.

Other continuation coverage rules

Continuation coverage rules which are parallel to the Code's continuation coverage rules apply to group health plans under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA).²³⁴ ERISA generally permits the Secretary of Labor and plan participants to bring a civil action to obtain appropriate equitable relief to enforce the continuation coverage rules of ERISA, and in the case of a plan administrator who fails to give timely notice to a participant or beneficiary with respect to COBRA continuation coverage, a court may hold the plan administrator liable to the participant or beneficiary in the amount of up to \$110 a day from the date of such failure.

Although the Federal government and State and local governments are not subject to the Code and ERISA's continuation coverage rules, other laws impose similar continuation coverage requirements with respect to plans maintained by such governmental employers.²³⁵ In addition, many States have enacted laws or promulgated regulations that provide continuation coverage rights that are similar to COBRA continuation coverage rights in the case of a loss of group health coverage. Such State laws, for example, may apply in the case of a loss of coverage under a group health plan maintained by a small employer.

House Bill

Reduced COBRA premium

The provision provides that, for a period not exceeding 12 months, an assistance eligible individual is treated as having paid any premium required for COBRA continuation coverage under a group health plan if the individual pays 35 percent of the premium.²³⁶ Thus, if the assistance eligible individual pays 35 percent of the premium, the group health plan must treat the individual as having paid the full premium required for COBRA continuation coverage, and the individual is entitled to a subsidy for 65 percent of the premium. An assistance eligible individual is any qualified beneficiary who elects COBRA continuation coverage and satisfies

²³⁴ Secs. 601 to 608 of ERISA.

²³⁵ Continuation coverage rights similar to COBRA continuation coverage rights are provided to individuals covered by health plans maintained by the Federal government. 5 U.S.C. sec. 8905a. Group health plans maintained by a State that receives funds under Chapter 6A of Title 42 of the United States Code (the Public Health Service Act) are required to provide continuation coverage rights similar to COBRA continuation coverage rights for individuals covered by plans maintained by such State (and plans maintained by political subdivisions of such State and agencies and instrumentalities of such State or political subdivision of such State). 42 U.S.C. sec. 300bb-1.

²³⁶ For this purpose, payment by an assistance eligible individual includes payment by another individual paying on behalf of the individual, such as a parent or guardian, or an entity paying on behalf of the individual, such as a State agency or charity. Further, the amount of the premium used to calculate the reduced premium is the premium amount that the employee would be required to pay for COBRA continuation coverage absent this premium reduction (e.g. 102 percent of the "applicable premium" for such period).

two additional requirements. First, the qualifying event with respect to the covered employee for that qualified beneficiary must be a loss of group health plan coverage on account of an involuntary termination of the covered employee's employment. However, a termination of employment for gross misconduct does not qualify (since such a termination under present law does not qualify for COBRA continuation coverage). Second, the qualifying event must occur during the period beginning September 1, 2008 and ending with December 31, 2009 and the qualified beneficiary must be eligible for COBRA continuation coverage during that period and elect such coverage.

An assistance eligible individual can be any qualified beneficiary associated with the relevant covered employee (e.g., a dependent of an employee who is covered immediately prior to a qualifying event), and such qualified beneficiary can independently elect COBRA (as provided under present law COBRA rules) and independently receive a subsidy. Thus, the subsidy for an assistance eligible individual continues after an intervening death of the covered employee.

Under the provision, any subsidy provided is excludible from the gross income of the covered employee and any assistance eligible individuals. However, for purposes of determining the gross income of the employer and any welfare benefit plan of which the group health plan is a part, the amount of the premium reduction is intended to be treated as an employee contribution to the group health plan. Finally, under the provision, notwithstanding any other provision of law, the subsidy is not permitted to be considered as income or resources in determining eligibility for, or the amount of assistance or benefits under, any public benefit provided under Federal or State law (including the law of any political subdivision).

Eligible COBRA continuation coverage

Under the provision, continuation coverage that qualifies for the subsidy is not limited to coverage required to be offered under the Code's COBRA rules but also includes continuation coverage required under State law that requires continuation coverage comparable to the continuation coverage required under the Code's COBRA rules for group health plans not subject to those rules (e.g., a small employer plan) and includes continuation coverage requirements that apply to health plans maintained by the Federal government or a State government. Comparable continuation coverage under State law does not include every State law right to continue health coverage, such as a right to continue coverage with no rules that limit the maximum premium that can be charged with respect to such coverage. To be comparable, the right generally must be to continue substantially similar coverage as was provided under the group health plan (or substantially similar coverage as is provided to similarly situated beneficiaries) at a monthly cost that is based on a specified percentage of the group health plan's cost of providing such coverage.

The cost of coverage under any group health plan that is subject to the Code's COBRA rules (or comparable State requirements or continuation coverage requirement under health plans maintained by the Federal government or any State government) is eligible for the subsidy, except contributions to a health flexible spending account.

Termination of eligibility for reduced premiums

The assistance eligible individual's eligibility for the subsidy terminates with the first month beginning on or after the earlier of (1) the date which is 12 months after the first day of the first month for which the subsidy applies, (2) the end of the maximum required period of continuation coverage for the qualified beneficiary under the Code's COBRA rules or the relevant State or Federal law (or regulation), or (3) the date that the assistance eligible individual becomes eligible for Medicare benefits under title XVIII of the Social Security Act or health coverage under another group health plan (including, for example, a group health plan maintained by the new employer of the individual or a plan maintained by the employer of the individual's spouse). However, eligibility for coverage under another group health plan does not terminate eligibility for the subsidy if the other group health plan provides only dental, vision, counseling, or referral services (or a combination of the foregoing), is a health flexible spending account or health reimbursement arrangement, or is coverage for treatment that is furnished in an on-site medical facility maintained by the employer and that consists primarily of first-aid services, prevention and wellness care, or similar care (or a combination of such care).

If a qualified beneficiary paying a reduced premium for COBRA continuation coverage under this provision becomes eligible for coverage under another group health plan or Medicare, the provision requires the qualified beneficiary to notify, in writing, the group health plan providing the COBRA continuation coverage with the reduced premium of such eligibility under the other plan or Medicare. The notification by the assistance eligible individual must be provided to the group health plan in the time and manner as is specified by the Secretary of Labor. If an assistance eligible individual fails to provide this notification at the required time and in the required manner, and as a result the individual's COBRA continuation coverage continues to be subsidized after the termination of the individual's eligibility for such subsidy, a penalty is imposed on the individual equal to 110 percent of the subsidy provided after termination of eligibility.

This penalty only applies if the subsidy in the form of the premium reduction is actually provided to a qualified beneficiary for a month that the beneficiary is not eligible for the reduction. Thus, for example, if a qualified beneficiary becomes eligible for coverage under another group health plan and stops paying the reduced COBRA continuation premium, the penalty generally will not apply. As discussed below, under the provision, the group health plan is reimbursed for the subsidy for a month (65 percent of the amount of the premium for the month) only after receipt of the qualified beneficiary's portion (35 percent of the premium amount). Thus, the penalty generally will only arise when the qualified beneficiary continues to pay the reduced premium and does not notify the group health plan providing COBRA continuation coverage of the beneficiary's eligibility under another group health plan or Medicare.

Special COBRA election opportunity

The provision provides a special 60 day election period for a qualified beneficiary who is eligible for a reduced premium and who has not elected COBRA continuation coverage as of the date of enactment. The 60 day election period begins on the date that notice is provided to the qualified beneficiary of the special election period. However, this special election period does

not extend the period of COBRA continuation coverage beyond the original maximum required period (generally 18 months after the qualifying event) and any COBRA continuation coverage elected pursuant to this special election period begins on the date of enactment and does not include any period prior to that date. Thus, for example, if a covered employee involuntarily terminated employment on September 10, 2008, but did not elect COBRA continuation coverage and was not eligible for coverage under another group health plan, the employee would have 60 days after date of notification of this new election right to elect the coverage and receive the subsidy. If the employee made the election, the coverage would begin with the date of enactment and would not include any period prior to that date. However, the coverage would not be required to last for 18 months. Instead the maximum required COBRA continuation coverage period would end not later than 18 months after September 10, 2008.

The special enrollment provision applies to a group health plan that is subject to the COBRA continuation coverage requirements of the Code, ERISA, Title 5 of the United States Code (relating to plans maintained by the Federal government), or the Public Health Service Act ("PHSA").

With respect to an assistance eligible individual who elects coverage pursuant to the special election period, the period beginning on the date of the qualifying event and ending with the day before the date of enactment is disregarded for purposes of the rules that limit the group health plan from imposing pre-existing condition limitations with respect to the individual's coverage.²³⁷

Reimbursement of group health plans

The provision provides that the entity to which premiums are payable (determined under the applicable COBRA continuation coverage requirement)²³⁸ shall be reimbursed by the amount of the premium for COBRA continuation coverage that is not paid by an assistance eligible individual on account of the premium reduction. An entity is not eligible for subsidy reimbursement, however, until the entity has received the reduced premium payment from the assistance eligible individual. To the extent that such entity has liability for income tax withholding from wages²³⁹ or FICA taxes²⁴⁰ with respect to its employees, the entity is

²³⁷ Section 9801 provides that a group health plan may impose a pre-existing condition exclusion for no more than 12 months after a participant or beneficiary's enrollment date. Such 12-month period must be reduced by the aggregate period of creditable coverage (which includes periods of coverage under another group health plan). A period of creditable coverage can be disregarded if, after the coverage period and before the enrollment date, there was a 63-day period during which the individual was not covered under any creditable coverage. Similar rules are provided under ERISA and PHSA.

²³⁸ Applicable continuation coverage that qualifies for the subsidy and thus for reimbursement is not limited to coverage required to be offered under the Code's COBRA rules but also includes continuation coverage required under State law that requires continuation coverage comparable to the continuation coverage required under the Code's COBRA rules for group health plans not subject to those rules (e.g., a small employer plan) and includes continuation coverage requirements that apply to health plans maintained by the Federal government or a State government.

²³⁹ Sec. 3401.

reimbursed by treating the amount that is reimbursable to the entity as a credit against its liability for these payroll taxes.²⁴¹ To the extent that such amount exceeds the amount of the entity's liability for these payroll taxes, the Secretary shall reimburse the entity for the excess directly. The provision requires any entity entitled to such reimbursement to submit such reports as the Secretary of Treasury may require, including an attestation of the involuntary termination of employment of each covered employee on the basis of whose termination entitlement to reimbursement of premiums is claimed, and a report of the amount of payroll taxes offset for a reporting period and the estimated offsets of such taxes for the next reporting period. This report is required to be provided at the same time as the deposits of the payroll taxes would have been required, absent the offset, or such times as the Secretary specifies.

Notice requirements

The notice of COBRA continuation coverage that a plan administrator is required to provide to qualified beneficiaries with respect to a qualifying event under present law must contain, under the provision, additional information including, for example, information about the qualified beneficiary's right to the premium reduction (and subsidy) and the conditions on the subsidy, and a description of the obligation of the qualified beneficiary to notify the group health plan of eligibility under another group health plan or eligibility for Medicare benefits under title XVIII of the Social Security Act, and the penalty for failure to provide this notification. The provision also requires a new notice to be given to qualified beneficiaries entitled to a special election period after enactment. In the case of group health plans that are not subject to the COBRA continuation coverage requirements of the Code, ERISA, Title 5 of the United States Code (relating to plans maintained by the Federal government), or PHSA, the provision requires that notice be given to the relevant employees and beneficiaries as well, as specified by the Secretary of Labor. Within 30 days after enactment, the Secretary of Labor is directed to provide model language for the additional notification required under the provision. The provision also provides an expedited 10-day review process by the Department of Labor, under which an individual may request review of a denial of treatment as an assistance eligible individual by a group health plan.

Regulatory authority

The provision provides authority to the Secretary of the Treasury to issue regulations or other guidance as may be necessary or appropriate to carry out the provision, including any reporting requirements or the establishment of other methods for verifying the correct amounts of payments and credits under the provision. For example, the Secretary of the Treasury might require verification on the return of an assistance eligible individual who is the covered employee that the individual's termination of employment was involuntary. The provision

²⁴⁰ Sec. 3102 (relating to FICA taxes applicable to employees) and sec. 3111 (relating to FICA taxes applicable to employers).

²⁴¹ In determining any amount transferred or appropriated to any fund under the Social Security Act, amounts credited against an employer's payroll tax obligations pursuant to the provision shall not be taken into account.

directs the Secretary of the Treasury to issue guidance or regulations addressing the reimbursement of the subsidy in the case of a multiemployer group health plan. The provision also provides authority to the Secretary of the Treasury to promulgate rules, procedures, regulations, and other guidance as is necessary and appropriate to prevent fraud and abuse in the subsidy program, including the employment tax offset mechanism.

Reports

The provision requires the Secretary of the Treasury to submit an interim and a final report regarding the implementation of the premium reduction provision. The interim report is to include information about the number of individuals receiving assistance, and the total amount of expenditures incurred, as of the date of the report. The final report, to be issued as soon as practicable after the last period of COBRA continuation coverage for which premiums are provided, is to include similar information as provided in the interim report, with the addition of information about the average dollar amount (monthly and annually) of premium reductions provided to such individuals. The reports are to be given to the Committee on Ways and Means, the Committee on Energy and Commerce, the Committee on Health Education, Labor and Pensions and the Committee on Finance.

Effective date

The provision is effective for premiums for months of coverage beginning on or after the date of enactment. However, it is intended that a group health plan will not fail to satisfy the requirements for COBRA continuation coverage merely because the plan accepts payment of 100 percent of the premium from an assistance eligible employee during the first two months beginning on or after the date of enactment while the premium reduction is being implemented, provided the amount of the resulting premium overpayment is credited against the individual's premium (35 percent of the premium) for future months or the overpayment is otherwise repaid to the employee as soon as practical.

Senate Amendment

The Senate amendment is the same as the House bill with certain modifications. The amount of the COBRA the premium reduction (or subsidy) is 50 percent of the required premium under the Senate amendment (rather than 65 percent as provided under the House bill).

In addition, a group health plan is permitted to provide a special enrollment right to assistance-eligible individuals to allow them to change coverage options under the plan in conjunction with electing COBRA continuation coverage. Under this special enrollment right, the assistance eligible individual must only be offered the option to change to any coverage option offered to employed workers that provides the same or lower health insurance premiums than the individual's group health plan coverage as of the date of the covered employee's qualifying event. If the individual elects a different coverage option under this special enrollment right in conjunction with electing COBRA continuation coverage, this is the coverage that must be provided for purposes of satisfying the COBRA continuation coverage requirement. However the coverage plan option into which the individual must be given the opportunity to enroll under this special enrollment right does not include the following: a coverage option

providing only dental, vision, counseling, or referral services (or a combination of the foregoing); a health flexible spending account or health reimbursement arrangement; or coverage for treatment that is furnished in an on-site medical facility maintained by the employer and that consists primarily of first-aid services, prevention and wellness care, or similar care (or a combination of such care).

Effective date.—The provision is effective for months of coverage beginning after the date of enactment. In addition, the Senate amendment specifically provides rules for reimbursement of an assistance eligible individual if such individual pays 100 percent of the premium required for COBRA continuation coverage for any month during the 60-day period beginning on the first day of the first month after the date of enactment. The person who receives the premium overpayment is permitted to provide a credit to the assistance eligible individual for the amount overpaid against one or more subsequent premiums (subject to the 50 percent payment rule) for COBRA continuation coverage, but only if it is reasonable to believe that the credit for the excess will be used by the assistance eligible individual within 180 days of the individual's overpayment. Otherwise, the person must make a reimbursement payment to the individual for the amount of the premium overpayment within 60 days of receiving the overpayment. Further, if as of any day during the 180-day period it is no longer reasonable to believe that the credit will be used during that period by the assistance eligible individual (e.g., the individual ceases to be eligible for COBRA continuation coverage), payment equal to the remainder of the credit outstanding must be made to the individual within 60 days of such day.

Conference Agreement

In general

The conference agreement generally follows the House bill. Thus, as under the House bill, the rate of the premium subsidy is 65 percent of the premium for a period of coverage. However, the period of the premium subsidy is limited to a maximum of 9 months of coverage (instead of a maximum of 12 months). As under the House bill and Senate amendment, the premium subsidy is only provided with respect to involuntary terminations that occur on or after September 1, 2008, and before January 1, 2010.

The conference agreement includes the provision in the Senate amendment that permits a group health plan to provide a special enrollment right to assistance eligible individuals to allow them to change coverage options under the plan in conjunction with electing COBRA continuation coverage.²⁴² This provision only allows a group health plan to offer additional coverage options to assistance eligible individuals and does not change the basic requirement under Federal COBRA continuation coverage requirements that a group health plan must allow an assistance eligible individual to choose to continue with the coverage in which the individual is enrolled as of the qualifying event.²⁴³ However, once the election of the other coverage is

²⁴² An employer can make this option available to covered employees under current law.

²⁴³ All references to "Federal COBRA continuation coverage" mean the COBRA continuation coverage provisions of the Code, ERISA, and PHSA.

made, it becomes COBRA continuation coverage under the applicable COBRA continuation provisions. Thus, for example, under the Federal COBRA continuation coverage provisions, if a covered employee chooses different coverage pursuant to being provided this option, the different coverage elected must generally be permitted to be continued for the applicable required period (generally 18 months or 36 months, absent an event that permits coverage to be terminated under the Federal COBRA continuation provisions) even though the premium subsidy is only for nine months.

The conference agreement adds an income threshold as an additional condition on an individual's entitlement to the premium subsidy during any taxable year. The income threshold applies based on the modified adjusted gross income for an individual income tax return for the taxable year in which the subsidy is received (i.e., either 2009 or 2010) with respect to which the assistance eligible individual is the taxpayer, the taxpayer's spouse or a dependent of the taxpayer (within the meaning of section 152 of the Code, determined without regard to sections 152(b)(1), (b)(2) and (d)(1)(B)). Modified adjusted gross income for this purpose means adjusted gross income as defined in section 62 of the Code increased by any amount excluded from gross income under section 911, 931, or 933 of the Code. Under this income threshold, if the premium subsidy is provided with respect to any COBRA continuation coverage which covers the taxpayer, the taxpayer's spouse, or any dependent of the taxpayer during a taxable year and the taxpayer's modified adjusted gross income exceeds \$145,000 (or \$290,000 for joint filers), then the amount of the premium subsidy for all months during the taxable year must be repaid. The mechanism for repayment is an increase in the taxpayer's income tax liability for the year equal to such amount. For taxpayers with adjusted gross income between \$125,000 and \$145,000 (or \$250,000 and \$290,000 for joint filers), the amount of the premium subsidy for the taxable year that must be repaid is reduced proportionately.

Under this income threshold, for example, an assistance eligible individual who is eligible for Federal COBRA continuation coverage based on the involuntary termination of a covered employee in August 2009 but who is not entitled to the premium subsidy for the periods of coverage during 2009 due to having income above the threshold, may nevertheless be entitled to the premium subsidy for any periods of coverage in the remaining period (e.g. 5 months of coverage) during 2010 to which the subsidy applies if the modified adjusted gross income for 2010 of the relevant taxpayer is not above the income threshold.

The conference report allows an individual to make a permanent election (at such time and in such form as the Secretary of Treasury may prescribe) to waive the right to the premium subsidy for all periods of coverage. For the election to take effect, the individual must notify the entity (to which premiums are reimbursed under section 6432(a) of the Code) of the election. This waiver provision allows an assistance eligible individual who is certain that the modified adjusted gross income limit prevents the individual from being entitled to any premium subsidy for any coverage period to decline the subsidy for all coverage periods and avoid being subject to the recapture tax. However, this waiver applies to all periods of coverage (regardless of the tax year of the coverage) for which the individual might be entitled to the subsidy. The premium subsidy for any period of coverage cannot later be claimed as a tax credit or otherwise be recovered, even if the individual later determines that the income threshold was not exceeded for a relevant tax year. This waiver is made separately by each qualified beneficiary (who could be an assistance eligible individual) with respect to a covered employee.

Technical changes

The conference agreement makes a number of technical changes to the COBRA premium subsidy provisions in the House bill. The conference agreement clarifies that a reference to a period of coverage in the provision is a reference to the monthly or shorter period of coverage with respect to which premiums are charged with respect to such coverage. For example, the provision is effective for a period of coverage beginning after the date of enactment. In the case of a plan that provides and charges for COBRA continuation coverage on a calendar month basis, the provision is effective for the first calendar month following date of enactment.

The conference agreement specifically provides that if a person other than the individual's employer pays on the individual's behalf then the individual is treated as paying 35 percent of the premium, as required to be entitled to the premium subsidy. Thus, the conference agreement makes clear that, for this purpose, payment by an assistance eligible individual includes payment by another individual paying on behalf of the individual, such as a parent or guardian, or an entity paying on behalf of the individual, such as a State agency or charity.

The conference agreement clarifies that, for the special 60 day election period for a qualified beneficiary who is eligible for a reduced premium and who has not elected COBRA continuation coverage as of the date of enactment provided in the House bill, the election period begins on the date of enactment and ends 60 days after the notice is provided to the qualified beneficiary of the special election period. In addition, the conference agreement clarifies that coverage elected under this special election right begins with the first period of coverage beginning on or after the date of enactment. The conference agreement also extends this special COBRA election opportunity to a qualified beneficiary who elected COBRA coverage but who is no longer enrolled on the date of enactment, for example, because the beneficiary was unable to continue paying the premium.

The conference agreement clarifies that a violation of the new notice requirements is also a violation of the notice requirements of the underlying COBRA provision. As under the House bill, a notice must be provided to all individuals who terminated employment during the applicable time period, and not just to individuals who were involuntarily terminated.

As under the House bill, coverage under a flexible spending account ("FSA") is not eligible for the subsidy. The conference agreement clarifies that a FSA is defined as a health flexible spending account offered under a cafeteria plan within the meaning of section 125 of the Code.²⁴⁴

As under the House bill, there is a provision for expedited review, by the Secretary of Labor or Health and Human Services (in consultation with the Secretary of the Treasury), of denials of the premium subsidy. Under the conference agreement, such reviews must be

²⁴⁴ Other FSA coverage does not terminate eligibility for coverage. Coverage under another group Health Reimbursement Account ("HRA") will not terminate an individual's eligibility for the subsidy as long as the HRA is properly classified as an FSA under relevant IRS guidance. See Notice 2002-45, 2002-2 CB 93.

completed within 15 business days (rather than 10 business days as provided in the House bill) after receipt of the individual's application for review. The conference agreement is intended to give the Secretaries the flexibility necessary to make determinations within 15 business days based upon evidence they believe, in their discretion, to be appropriate. Additionally, the conference agreement intends that, if an individual is denied treatment as an assistance eligible individual and also submits a claim for benefits to the plan that would be denied by reason of not being eligible for Federal COBRA continuation coverage (or failure to pay full premiums), the individual would be eligible to proceed with expedited review irrespective of any claims for benefits that may be pending or subject to review under the provisions of ERISA 503. Under the conference agreement, either Secretary's determination upon review is de novo and is the final determination of such Secretary.

The conference agreement clarifies the reimbursement mechanism for the premium subsidy in several respects. First, it clarifies that the person to whom the reimbursement is payable is either (1) the multiemployer group health plan, (2) the employer maintaining the group health plan subject to Federal COBRA continuation coverage requirements, and (3) the insurer providing coverage under an insured plan. Thus, this is the person who is eligible to offset its payroll taxes for purposes of reimbursement. It also clarifies that the credit for the reimbursement is treated as a payment of payroll taxes. Thus, it clarifies that any reimbursement for an amount in excess of the payroll taxes owed is treated in the same manner as a tax refund. Similarly, it clarifies that overstatement of reimbursement is a payroll tax violation. For example, IRS can assert appropriate penalties for failing to truthfully account for the reimbursement. However, it is not intended that any portion of the reimbursement is taken into account when determining the amount of any penalty to be imposed against any person, required to collect, truthfully account for, and pay over any tax under section 6672 of the Code.

It is intended that reimbursement not be mirrored in the U.S. possessions that have mirror income tax codes (the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and the Virgin Islands). Rather, the intent of Congress is that reimbursement will have direct application to persons in those possessions. Moreover, it is intended that income tax withholding payable to the government of any possession (American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Guam, or the Virgin Islands) (in contrast with FICA withholding payable to the U.S. Treasury) will not be reduced as a result of the application of this provision. A person liable for both FICA withholding payable to the U.S. Treasury and income tax withholding payable to a possession government will be credited or refunded any excess of (1) the amount of FICA taxes treated as paid under the reimbursement rule of the provision over (2) the amount of the person's liability for those FICA taxes.

Effective date

The provision is effective for periods of coverage beginning after the date of enactment. In addition, specific rules are provided in the case of an assistance eligible individual who pays 100 percent of the premium required for COBRA continuation coverage for any coverage period during the 60-day period beginning on the first day of the first coverage period after the date of enactment. Such rules follow the Senate amendment.