Farm Bill includes provisions for health plans for farmers and ranchers—Now awaiting a floor decision, the Farm Bill has been particularly controversial this year due to the push for work requirements to receive supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP) benefits. The bill also includes provisions to create health plans for agricultural workers that are similar to association health plans. Opponents caution that these plans will destabilize the Affordable Care Act (ACA) market and remove consumer protection by stripping the plans of necessary benefits. Those in favor express that the ACA has placed a burden on farmers who must buy non-employer sponsored private insurance and pay high premiums.

Bariatric surgery not covered in marketplace insurance plans in states with highest rates of obesity—While bariatric surgery can drastically reduce the chances of dying for overweight patients, many states do not cover it. Meanwhile, for individuals who live in states that cover the surgery, the various preoperative requirements, that widely contrast from one state to the next, leave over 90 percent of them ineligible for coverage. Without insurance, out-of-pocket costs can go up to $30,000 for some of the common surgeries, possibly causing people to undergo surgery in Mexico.

Walmart follows Aetna and CVS in limiting first-time opioid prescriptions to seven days—Based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines, the company will join in implementing prescription limits based on findings that longer prescriptions increase the risk of addiction by an additional 7.5 percent. Walmart will also require electronic prescriptions for opioids starting in 2020 to cut down on prescription fraud.

ACA’s calorie counts are now in effect—Fast-food chains (with 20+ stores), restaurants, grocers, movie theaters, and vending machines will provide calorie counts and additional nutritional information to better inform consumers. The Food and Drug Administration will be guiding the industries in complying with the new rules. Opponents believe this is government overreach.

Ebola outbreak declared in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The World Health Organization sent one million dollars and dispatched a task force to work with the Democratic Republic of Congo to contain the disease after the virus was found in the samples of two out of five tested patients. The seventeen other deaths in the region are suspected to be due to Ebola as well. As medical teams work to contain the outbreak, scientists see promising results from experimental vaccinations.
California

Heroin use continues to be a big problem in Northern California, especially amongst the chronically homeless— Some residents are blaming the needle exchange programs over the increase in improperly discarded syringes being found in parks and public areas. Coincidentally, counties in Northern California are experiencing a big surge in heroin use and overdoses, but there is a severe shortage of treatment centers. Community members believe the key to reducing drug addiction and homelessness will be affordable housing.

Nursing home complaints on the rise in California— Based on the increase in the number of complaints and the lack of corresponding citations, the California Department of Public Health is now training investigators on issuing citations. An audit brought attention to certain private nursing homes that have seen large profit increases between 2007-2015. Lawmakers have introduced bills to increase transparency when it comes to how nursing homes are doing their business and hiring practices.

Researchers at the University of California San Francisco find that minor concussions can increase the risk of neurodegenerative diseases later in life— The researchers published their findings in the Journal of American Medicine Neurology after assessing nearly 360,000 veterans over a four-year period. They noted that even those who suffered a hit to the head without losing consciousness had an increased risk for brain injury. Concussions have been a hot topic as former professional football players are experiencing mental health issues. States have also been contemplating the best way to minimize participation of youth in tackle football and blows to the head, but these policies face mass resistance from schools, coaches, and even parents.

Other States

Needle-exchange bill dies in Arizona— Despite its bipartisan support in the House, the two houses failed to reach a compromise in time for the bill to legalize needle-exchange programs. In the current system, it is technically illegal for volunteers to distribute clean needles and naloxone but officials are not enforcing harsh penalties and are instead issuing verbal warnings to stop. Proponents of the bill are looking to the next legislative session to try and reintroduce the bill.

Alabama, Mississippi, and Oklahoma approve the use of nitrogen gas to replace lethal injection— While states like Nevada and Nebraska are looking to use fentanyl as a sedative before administering a lethal injection, other states are looking to replace lethal injections altogether. In efforts to curb the unpredictability of results from lethal injection, these states are hoping that nitrogen gas inhalation will be a viable substitute. Scientists from all sides of the debate are voicing their professional opinions on the ethics and feasibility of the method as the states begin developing the protocols.

Iowa’s heartbeat bill becomes the strictest abortion legislation in the country— Iowa’s governor signed a bill to ban abortions once the first heartbeat is detected, usually around six weeks of pregnancy. Until this bill was signed, the ban was set at 20 weeks. Critics fear that many women may not be aware of their pregnancy at six weeks. If the state is not sued, the law will go into effect on July 1 this year. Over nineteen states have passed strict abortion restrictions in the past two years.

ACA marketplace insurers in Maryland and Virginia may increase 2019 premiums— In anticipation of losing healthy individuals due to the mandate repeal and short-term health plans, health insurance companies are proposing premium increases ranging from 6 to 40 percent.

Pennsylvania-based health insurance company will cover DNA sequencing as routine care in new pilot project— The Geisinger company will pay for the DNA sequencing of 1,000 patients with the hopes of expanding in the near future. The CEO believes these tests will be cost-effective in the long run by catching diseases earlier on.

Maine’s lawmakers pass drug pricing transparency bill— Starting in 2019, the Maine Health Data Organization will release information on the top drugs prescribed and their year-to-year price changes.
Noteworthy Health Care Studies

**JAMA Psychiatry**
Fentanyl and other synthetic opioids caused a higher number of opioid deaths than prescription opioids in 2016. From 2010-2016, the percentage of opioid-related deaths due to synthetics increased from 13 to 45 percent.

**Pediatrics**
In the study population, the rate of pregnant women infected with hepatitis C increased by 60 percent. Only 30 percent of the infants of the infected mothers were screened and tested for hepatitis C.

**The BMJ**
There is a 40 percent increased risk of patient mortality and a 30 percent increased risk of an incident related to patient safety when nurses experience high workloads.

Newsbytes Relevant to Our Strategic Priorities

To bring focus to our work, the Institute for Health Policy and Leadership has identified three strategic priorities: oral health, mental health and hunger as a health issue. This segment highlights news articles relevant to these priorities.

**Oral Health**
The CDC found that while the rate of tooth decay decreased overall for all youth, racial disparities exist—last month’s report found that Hispanic youth have a much higher prevalence of total and untreated caries than all other races. African American youth were reported as having the highest rates of untreated cavities. Higher rates of disease correlated with lower family income.

**Hunger as a Health Issue**
Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive takes place nationwide on May 12, 2018—Feeding South Dakota partnered with mail carriers to expand the food drive nationwide. Anybody in the United States can leave non-perishable goods next to their mailbox on Saturday, and the mail service provider will take the donations to local food banks and other participants. These efforts are all intended to help the more than 41 million people who are food insecure in the United States.

**Mental/Behavioral Health**
Illinois to spend $2 billion on 10 pilot programs to increase access to behavioral health services for Medicaid recipients—The state received an 1115 Medicaid waiver to test a variety of mental/behavioral health initiatives to improve access to services and outcomes. The focus will be on providing counseling, intervention, and treatment for people with substance use disorders. The program will also cover postpartum visits for mothers who have a history of opioid abuse as well as home visits for babies undergoing opioid withdrawal.

Like what you see? Don’t forget to check out our website where you can find our Policy Briefs, Issue Briefs, and much more!