

Premium alignment: Frequently asked questions

What is premium alignment?

Premium alignment, also referred to as uniform Silver loading, is a change coming to Washington Healthplanfinder for plan year 2026. The change will increase advance premium tax credits (APTC) for customers who qualify, helping customers afford their monthly premium. An [analysis by Axene Health Partners](#) from 2020 estimated premium alignment will increase the amount of APTC available to Washingtonians by about \$110 million per year.

Why is the Exchange doing premium alignment now?

Premium alignment will increase available APTC for qualified health plan (QHP) customers at a time when affordability is at risk due to the expiration of enhanced premium tax credits (ePTCs).

If ePTCs expire at the end of 2025, as they are set to, we estimate QHP customers in Washington will lose about \$275 million dollars annually in federal financial support. The average Washington Healthplanfinder customer's premium will increase by \$1,300 annually. Customers over the age of 55 will have their annual premium cost increase by \$1,900. The Exchange's actuaries estimate around 80,000 people will lose their coverage when ePTCs expire. Increasing APTC will help to offset the loss of ePTC and keep some of those 80,000 people covered.

Recognizing the expected enrollment loss in 2026, Washington State Office of the Insurance Commissioner enacted an emergency rule to preserve customer affordability and stability in Washington Healthplanfinder by introducing premium alignment practices in our state.

How does premium alignment work?

Premium alignment will increase Silver plan rates by up to 30% and will slightly decrease Gold and Bronze plan rates. Silver plans will be more expensive than Gold plans. Increasing Silver plan prices increases APTC for subsidized customers.

Where did the idea for premium alignment come from?

Premium alignment is happening because of a 2017 federal government decision to stop making payments to carriers for cost-sharing reductions (CSRs), which are reduced out-of-pocket costs available to certain customers enrolled in Silver plans. This action resulted in states instructing carriers to add the cost of those CSRs onto Silver plan premiums.

Premium alignment requires carriers to take a uniform approach to adjusting plan prices to account for the cost of CSRs. For more information, see this [article from Health Affairs](#).

Seven states have adopted some version of premium alignment, including Maryland (since 2018), Pennsylvania (2021), New Mexico (2022) and Texas (2023).

Does premium alignment apply to all plans or just Cascade Care plans?

Premium alignment applies to all plans. All Silver plans (non-Cascade, Cascade and Cascade Select) will increase in price due to premium alignment.

How does premium alignment increase APTC?

APTC is calculated based on the premium of the second-lowest cost Silver plan in a county. When the gross premium for Silver plans increases, the APTC that subsidized customers can use to lower their premium increases. This APTC amount can be applied to customer premiums when they enroll in Silver plans, or any QHP at any metal level.

How will the Exchange support customers to navigate these changes?

The Exchange is committed to doing everything we can to help folks get into the highest-value, most affordable plan for them. Tools that are available to help customers choose the right plan for them include:

- Shopping and plan display;
- Annual cross mapping process;
- Cascade Care standard plans;
- Cascade Care Savings;
- Support from the Customer Support Center;
- Expert assistance from enrollment navigators and brokers; and
- Marketing and communications (internal to the Exchange and external).

What does this mean for customers who are eligible for APTC?

Customers eligible for APTC can use the additional APTC created by premium alignment to lower the cost of their Gold or Bronze plan, or to stay in a Silver plan at about the same cost to them.

What does this mean for customers who are not eligible for APTC?

Customers not eligible for APTC should enroll in a Gold or Bronze plan that is made slightly less expensive by premium alignment. In Pennsylvania, Gold and Bronze plan premiums [decreased](#) by about 10% following the implementation of premium alignment. The Cascade Care Vital Gold plan will offer these customers a less expensive plan with robust coverage.

If Silver plans are getting more expensive, should anyone enroll in them?

For customers who are CSR tier 5 and 6 eligible, Silver plans cover 87% and 94% of costs, on average. For these customers, Silver plans remain a good option. CSR tier 5 and 6 customers are APTC-eligible and have a household income below 200% of the federal poverty level.

All other customers should enroll in a Gold or a Bronze plan. The newly available Cascade Care Vital Gold plan is designed to offer a lower-cost option for customers who are currently in a Silver plan but are not eligible for CSR tier 5 or 6.

Will some customers currently in Silver plans need to change plans?

Customers currently in a Silver plan who are not CSR tier 5 or 6 eligible will be cross mapped to the Cascade Vital Gold plan from the same carrier with the same network and covered benefits as their Silver plan. The Cascade Vital Gold plan will be less expensive and provide greater coverage (lower deductible and copays), with access to the same providers, prescriptions and services.

Won't customers be confused by all these changes?

The Exchange is committed to helping customers enroll in the highest-value, most affordable plan that meets their needs. Premium alignment will help to alleviate the affordability concerns related to expected loss of ePTCs, but successful implementation

will require the Exchange to communicate clearly with customers, carriers and enrollment assisters and provide expert assistance to help customers select the best plan for them.

Customers want a high-quality, affordable plan that covers the services and providers they need. Premium alignment will make the same services, prescriptions and provider networks available to customers at a lower price, helping customers stay covered.

Will there be any system impact?

The highest priority changes for open enrollment are to plan display and shopping experience. Work is underway to implement those changes as part of the integration of the new Customer Decision Support Solution (Smart Planfinder) vendor. Additional changes may be needed for special enrollment periods. If there are other areas of the system that need to be assessed for impact, contact OSP.

Will there be any changes to cost-sharing reduction tiers or eligibility?

No, this policy does not make any changes to CSRs or customers eligibility for CSRs.

Have additional questions that aren't answered here?

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