



CHASING DREAMS

PENN STATE IS EMBRACING NATIONAL TITLE EXPECTATIONS. NOW, THE NITTANY LIONS HAVE TO PUT THE WORK IN TO MAKE THEIR DREAMS A REALITY, WRITES JOHNNY MCGONIGAL. **C1**

THE TRUMP ERA

Data nerds race to save government statistics



Commuters walk along a corridor in New York’s World Trade Center in 2019. The federal data that has been disappearing or getting modified pertains to a range of subjects — gender, sexual orientation, climate change and diversity. *AP file*

Their credo? That national data should be above partisan politics.

Mike Schneider *Associated Press*

The data nerds are fighting back. After watching data sets be altered or disappear from U.S. government websites in unprecedented ways after President Donald Trump began his second term, an army of outside statisticians, demographers and computer scientists have joined forces to capture, preserve and share data sets, sometimes clandestinely.

Their goal is to make sure they are available in the future, believing that democracy suffers when policymakers don’t have reliable data and that national statistics should be above partisan politics.

“There are such smart, passionate people who care deeply about not only the Census Bureau, but all the statistical agencies, and ensuring the integrity of the statistical system. And that gives me hope, even during these challenging times,” Mary Jo Mitchell,

“You can’t trust that this data is going to be here tomorrow.”

Lena Bohman, founding member of the Data Rescue Project

director of government and public affairs for the research nonprofit the Population Association of America, said this week during an online public data-users conference.

The threats to the U.S. data infrastructure since January have come not only from the disappearance or modification of data related to gender, sexual orientation, health, climate change and diversity, among other

topics, but also from job cuts of workers and contractors who had been guardians of restricted-access data at statistical agencies, the data experts said.

“There are trillions of bytes of data files, and I can’t even imagine how many public dollars were spent to collect those data. ... But right now, they’re sitting someplace that is inaccessible because there are no staff to appropriately manage those data,” Jennifer Park, a study director for the Committee on National Statistics, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, said during the conference hosted by the Association of Public Data Users, or APDU.

‘GENDER’ SWITCHED TO ‘SEX’

In February, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s official public portal for health data, data.cdc.gov, was taken down entirely but subsequently went back up. Around the same time, when a query was made to access certain public data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s most comprehensive survey of American life, users for several days got a response that said the area was “unavailable due to maintenance” before access was restored.

SEE GOVERNMENT, A2

PHILADELPHIA

Skulls found at Pa. museum connected to 1980 mystery

Rosa Cartagena *Philadelphia Inquirer*

On a Friday last November, staff at the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia were in the midst of conducting an audit of the medical history museum’s collection of some 6,600 human remains when they found a box in the library stacks of their Center City building.

The tag on it read, “Two mummified infant heads,” said Erin McLeary, senior director of collections and research.

It had a “found date” of 2005, which meant an employee noticed the box that year and flagged that not much was known of its origin, except the donor, the late forensic pathologist Halbert Fillinger, and June 9, 1999, the date the skulls were received.

“A woman whose parents had kept a boardinghouse in the 1920s or 30s was dying, and her last words were ‘Go look in

the attic’ ... and the name of a ... man who lived in the town. They found the mummified remains of five children,” the notes in Mütter’s donor file read.

The handwritten notes also indicated that the remains came from Gallitzin, Pennsylvania, a small town between Altoona and Johnstown.

When Mütter staffers searched newspaper archives, using keywords from the notes, they made a chilling discovery: The two skulls were connected to a notorious crime that made national news 45 years ago.

1980: STELLA WILLIAMSON’S LETTER

Back in 1980, the remains of five infants — believed to have been killed decades earlier — were found in the Gallitzin home of a woman named Stella Williamson after she died at 76.

“In the attic of her big, three-story, white frame house, in a beautiful hand-carved steel-banded chest, were the bodies of five babies — born between 1923 and 1933 and kept wrapped and bound in yellowing, crumbling newspapers all these years,” a Philadelphia Inquirer report from Sept. 7, 1980, reads.

In early 1960, following a health scare, Williamson had written a letter with instructions to open the chest after her death. It wasn’t found until after she died 20 years later.

“I want to make things right if anything should happen to me,” it read, according to an article that was published in the Washington Post in October 1980. It went on to quote more of the letter; some of its content redacted by local authorities.

SEE PHILADELPHIA, A2

INSURANCE DEPARTMENT

500K in Pa. face soaring health care premium

Companies are requesting much higher increases than last year.

Jack Troy *(Greensburg) Tribune-Review*

Nearly 500,000 Pennsylvanians could see their health insurance premiums spike next year.

Insurers selling coverage on the state’s Affordable Care Act marketplace, Pennie, want to raise premiums by an average of 19% for customers who buy their own insurance and 13% for small businesses, the Pennsylvania Insurance Department announced.

The department reviews proposed rates to make sure they’re not too high, too low or discriminating against certain groups of customers.

Companies are asking for much higher hikes than last year, when the average proposed increase came in at 8% for the individual and small business markets.

“This year, even more than previous years, Pennsylvanians should consider shopping around to find the best plans to meet their individual needs, at a price that makes sense for their current financial situation,” Pennsylvania Insurance Commissioner Michael Humphreys said in a statement.

Western Pennsylvania’s dominant health insurers, UPMC and Highmark, are requesting below average — but still substantial — hikes.

UPMC is seeking increases for individuals of between 12% and 16%. For Highmark, that range is 14% to 18%.

On small-business plans, UPMC is asking to raise premiums between 7% and 9%. Highmark’s requests for such plans, on the other hand, fall between 12% and 23% — the highest of any insurer in the state.

The Highmark plan that could see the highest increase covers northeastern Pennsylvania.

UPMC and Highmark made \$237 million and \$15 million respectively in the first quarter of this year.

Financial health will be just one factor the Insurance Department uses to approve or adjust rates.

It also looks at past rate changes, cost estimates and consumer impacts, according to its website.

Past filings show regulators usually trim requests for individual plans and make limited revisions on small business plans, which can be bought by companies with 50 or fewer employees.

Occasionally, regulators approve a higher-than-requested rate.

Regulators blame rising health care costs, higher use of medical services and the upcoming end of the enhanced premium tax credit to help customers afford insurance on the ACA marketplace.

Pennie claims its enrollees save around \$600 million annually through the expiring program.

To justify its desired hikes, Highmark cited the same factors as the Insurance Department as well as pent-up demand for care after the pandemic.

“We are committed to offering the high-quality coverage and experience that our Pennsylvania ACA members and small group employers have come to expect from Highmark,” David Golebiewski, a Highmark spokesperson, said in a statement.

Denise Hughes, a UPMC spokesperson, said the organization is “committed to continued work with the Insurance Department to continue to make affordable, high quality coverage options for consumers.”

The Insurance Department did not return a request for comment.

TO LEARN MORE

A company-by-company, plan-by-plan list is available at <https://tinyurl.com/ejpd-sy2p>.

Public comment on rate requests runs through Sept. 2 and can be emailed to ra-in-comment@pa.gov.