

§ 54.4980B-3 Qualified beneficiaries.

The determination of who is a qualified beneficiary, an employee, or a covered employee, and of who are the similarly situated nonCOBRA beneficiaries is addressed in the following questions-and-answers:

Q-1: Who is a qualified beneficiary?

A-1: (a)(1) Except as set forth in paragraphs (c) through (f) of this Q&A-1, a qualified beneficiary is—

(i) Any individual who, on the day before a qualifying event, is covered under a group health plan by virtue of being on that day either a covered employee, the spouse of a covered employee, or a dependent child of the covered employee; or

(ii) Any child who is born to or placed for adoption with a covered employee during a period of COBRA continuation coverage.

(2) In the case of a qualifying event that is the bankruptcy of the employer, a covered employee who had retired on or before the date of substantial elimination of group health plan coverage is also a qualified beneficiary, as is any spouse, surviving spouse, or dependent child of such a covered employee if, on the day before the bankruptcy qualifying event, the spouse, surviving spouse, or dependent child is a beneficiary under the plan.

(3) In general, an individual (other than a child who is born to or placed for adoption with a covered employee during a period of COBRA continuation coverage) who is not covered under a plan on the day before the qualifying event cannot be a qualified beneficiary with respect to that qualifying event, and the reason for the individual's lack of actual coverage (such as the individual's having declined participation in the plan or failed to satisfy the plan's conditions for participation) is not relevant for this purpose. However, if the individual is denied or not offered coverage under a plan under circumstances in which the denial or failure to offer constitutes a violation of applicable law (such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. 12101-12213, the special enrollment rules of section 9801, or the requirements of section 9802 prohibiting discrimination in eligibility to enroll in a group health plan based on health status),

then, for purposes of §§ 54.4980B-1 through 54.4980B-10, the individual will be considered to have had the coverage that was wrongfully denied or not offered.

(4) Paragraph (b) of this Q&A-1 describes how certain family members are not qualified beneficiaries even if they become covered under the plan; paragraphs (c), (d), and (e) of this Q&A-1 place limits on the general rules of this paragraph (a) concerning who is a qualified beneficiary; paragraph (f) of this Q&A-1 provides when an individual who has been a qualified beneficiary ceases to be a qualified beneficiary; paragraph (g) of this Q&A-1 defines *placed for adoption*; and paragraph (h) of this Q&A-1 contains examples.

(b) In contrast to a child who is born to or placed for adoption with a covered employee during a period of COBRA continuation coverage, an individual who marries any qualified beneficiary on or after the date of the qualifying event and a newborn or adopted child (other than one born to or placed for adoption with a covered employee) are not qualified beneficiaries by virtue of the marriage, birth, or placement for adoption or by virtue of the individual's status as the spouse or the child's status as a dependent of the qualified beneficiary. These new family members do not themselves become qualified beneficiaries even if they become covered under the plan. (For situations in which a plan is required to make coverage available to new family members of a qualified beneficiary who is receiving COBRA continuation coverage, see Q&A-5 of § 54.4980B-5, paragraph (c) in Q&A-4 of § 54.4980B-5, and section 9801(f)(2).)

(c) An individual is not a qualified beneficiary if, on the day before the qualifying event referred to in paragraph (a) of this Q&A-1, the individual is covered under the group health plan by reason of another individual's election of COBRA continuation coverage and is not already a qualified beneficiary by reason of a prior qualifying event.

(d) A covered employee can be a qualified beneficiary only in connection with a qualifying event that is the termination, or reduction of hours, of the covered employee's employment, or

that is the bankruptcy of the employer.

(e) An individual is not a qualified beneficiary if the individual's status as a covered employee is attributable to a period in which the individual was a nonresident alien who received from the individual's employer no earned income (within the meaning of section 911(d)(2)) that constituted income from sources within the United States (within the meaning of section 861(a)(3)). If, pursuant to the preceding sentence, an individual is not a qualified beneficiary, then a spouse or dependent child of the individual is not considered a qualified beneficiary by virtue of the relationship to the individual.

(f) A qualified beneficiary who does not elect COBRA continuation coverage in connection with a qualifying event ceases to be a qualified beneficiary at the end of the election period (see Q&A-1 of § 54.4980B-6). Thus, for example, if such a former qualified beneficiary is later added to a covered employee's coverage (e.g., during an open enrollment period) and then another qualifying event occurs with respect to the covered employee, the former qualified beneficiary does not become a qualified beneficiary by reason of the second qualifying event. If a covered employee who is a qualified beneficiary does not elect COBRA continuation coverage during the election period, then any child born to or placed for adoption with the covered employee on or after the date of the qualifying event is not a qualified beneficiary. Once a plan's obligation to make COBRA continuation coverage available to an individual who has been a qualified beneficiary ceases under the rules of § 54.4980B-7, the individual ceases to be a qualified beneficiary.

(g) For purposes of §§ 54.4980B-1 through 54.4980B-10, *placement for adoption* or *being placed for adoption* means the assumption and retention by the covered employee of a legal obligation for total or partial support of a child in anticipation of the adoption of the child. The child's placement for adoption with the covered employee terminates upon the termination of the legal obligation for total or partial support. A child who is immediately adopted by the covered employee without a pre-

ceding placement for adoption is considered to be placed for adoption on the date of the adoption.

(h) The rules of this Q&A-1 are illustrated by the following examples:

Example 1. (i) *B* is a single employee who voluntarily terminates employment and elects COBRA continuation coverage under a group health plan. To comply with the requirements of section 9801(f), the plan permits a covered employee who marries to have her or his spouse covered under the plan. One month after electing COBRA continuation coverage, *B* marries and chooses to have *B*'s spouse covered under the plan.

(ii) *B*'s spouse is not a qualified beneficiary. Thus, if *B* dies during the period of COBRA continuation coverage, the plan does not have to offer *B*'s surviving spouse an opportunity to elect COBRA continuation coverage.

Example 2. (i) *C* is a married employee who terminates employment. *C* elects COBRA continuation coverage for *C* but not *C*'s spouse, and *C*'s spouse declines to elect such coverage. *C*'s spouse thus ceases to be a qualified beneficiary. At the next open enrollment period, *C* adds the spouse as a beneficiary under the plan.

(ii) The addition of the spouse during the open enrollment period does not make the spouse a qualified beneficiary. The plan thus will not have to offer the spouse an opportunity to elect COBRA continuation coverage upon a later divorce from or death of *C*.

Example 3. (i) Under the terms of a group health plan, a covered employee's child, upon attaining age 19, ceases to be a dependent eligible for coverage.

(ii) At that time, the child must be offered an opportunity to elect COBRA continuation coverage. If the child elects COBRA continuation coverage, the child marries during the period of the COBRA continuation coverage, and the child's spouse becomes covered under the group health plan, the child's spouse is not a qualified beneficiary.

Example 4. (i) *D* is a single employee who, upon retirement, is given the opportunity to elect COBRA continuation coverage but declines it in favor of an alternative offer of 12 months of employer-paid retiree health benefits. At the end of the election period, *D* ceases to be a qualified beneficiary and will not have to be given another opportunity to elect COBRA continuation coverage (at the end of those 12 months or at any other time). *D* marries *E* during the period of retiree health coverage and, under the terms of that coverage, *E* becomes covered under the plan.

(ii) If a divorce from or death of *D* will result in *E*'s losing coverage, *E* will be a qualified beneficiary because *E*'s coverage under the plan on the day before the qualifying event (that is, the divorce or death) will have

been by reason of *D*'s acceptance of 12 months of employer-paid coverage after the prior qualifying event (*D*'s retirement) rather than by reason of an election of COBRA continuation coverage.

Example 5. (i) The facts are the same as in *Example 4*, except that, under the terms of the plan, the divorce or death does not cause *E* to lose coverage so that *E* continues to be covered for the balance of the original 12-month period.

(ii) *E* does not have to be allowed to elect COBRA continuation coverage because the loss of coverage at the end of the 12-month period is not caused by the divorce or death, and thus the divorce or death does not constitute a qualifying event. See Q&A-1 of § 54.4980B-4.

Q-2: Who is an employee and who is a covered employee?

A-2: (a)(1) For purposes of §§ 54.4980B-1 through 54.4980B-10 (except for purposes of Q&A-5 in § 54.4980B-2, relating to the exception from COBRA for plans maintained by an employer with fewer than 20 employees), an *employee* is any individual who is eligible to be covered under a group health plan by virtue of the performance of services for the employer maintaining the plan or by virtue of membership in the employee organization maintaining the plan. Thus, for purposes of §§ 54.4980B-1 through 54.4980B-10 (except for purposes of Q&A-5 in § 54.4980B-2), the following individuals are employees if their relationship to the employer maintaining the plan makes them eligible to be covered under the plan—

- (i) Self-employed individuals (within the meaning of section 401(c)(1));
- (ii) Independent contractors (and their employees and independent contractors); and
- (iii) Directors (in the case of a corporation).

(2) Similarly, whenever reference is made in §§ 54.4980B-1 through 54.4980B-10 (except in Q&A-5 of § 54.4980B-2) to an employment relationship (such as by referring to the termination of employment of an employee or to an employee's being employed by an employer), the reference includes the relationship of those individuals who are employees within the meaning of this paragraph (a). See paragraph (c) in Q&A-5 of § 54.4980B-2 for a narrower meaning of employee solely for purposes of Q&A-5 of § 54.4980B-2.

(b) For purposes of §§ 54.4980B-1 through 54.4980B-10, a *covered employee* is any individual who is (or was) provided coverage under a group health plan (other than a plan that is excepted from COBRA on the date of the qualifying event; see Q&A-4 of § 54.4980B-2) by virtue of being or having been an employee. For example, a retiree or former employee who is covered by a group health plan is a covered employee if the coverage results in whole or in part from her or his previous employment. An employee (or former employee) who is merely eligible for coverage under a group health plan is generally not a covered employee if the employee (or former employee) is not actually covered under the plan. In general, the reason for the employee's (or former employee's) lack of actual coverage (such as having declined participation in the plan or having failed to satisfy the plan's conditions for participation) is not relevant for this purpose. However, if the employee (or former employee) is denied or not offered coverage under circumstances in which the denial or failure to offer constitutes a violation of applicable law (such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. 12101 through 12213, the special enrollment rules of section 9801, or the requirements of section 9802 prohibiting discrimination in eligibility to enroll in a group health plan based on health status), then, for purposes of §§ 54.4980B-1 through 54.4980B-10, the employee (or former employee) will be considered to have had the coverage that was wrongfully denied or not offered.

Q-3: Who are the similarly situated nonCOBRA beneficiaries?

A-3: For purposes of §§ 54.4980B-1 through 54.4980B-10, *similarly situated nonCOBRA beneficiaries* means the group of covered employees, spouses of covered employees, or dependent children of covered employees receiving coverage under a group health plan maintained by the employer or employee organization who are receiving that coverage for a reason other than the rights provided under the COBRA continuation coverage requirements and who, based on all of the facts and circumstances, are most similarly situated to the situation of the qualified

beneficiary immediately before the qualifying event.

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§ 54.4980B-4 Qualifying events.

The determination of what constitutes a qualifying event is addressed in the following questions and answers:

Q-1: What is a qualifying event?

A-1: (a) A *qualifying event* is an event that satisfies paragraphs (b), (c), and (d) of this Q&A-1. Paragraph (e) of this Q&A-1 further explains a reduction of hours of employment, paragraph (f) of this Q&A-1 describes the treatment of children born to or placed for adoption with a covered employee during a period of COBRA continuation coverage, and paragraph (g) of this Q&A-1 contains examples. See Q&A-1 through Q&A-3 of § 54.4980B-10 for special rules in the case of leave taken under the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (29 U.S.C. 2601-2619).

(b) An event satisfies this paragraph (b) if the event is any of the following—

(1) The death of a covered employee;

(2) The termination (other than by reason of the employee's gross misconduct), or reduction of hours, of a covered employee's employment;

(3) The divorce or legal separation of a covered employee from the employee's spouse;

(4) A covered employee's becoming entitled to Medicare benefits under title XVIII of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 1395-1395ggg);

(5) A dependent child's ceasing to be a dependent child of a covered employee under the generally applicable requirements of the plan; or

(6) A proceeding in bankruptcy under title 11 of the United States Code with respect to an employer from whose employment a covered employee retired at any time.

(c) An event satisfies this paragraph (c) if, under the terms of the group health plan, the event causes the covered employee, or the spouse or a dependent child of the covered employee, to lose coverage under the plan. For this purpose, to lose coverage means to cease to be covered under the same terms and conditions as in effect immediately before the qualifying event. Any increase in the premium or con-

tribution that must be paid by a covered employee (or the spouse or dependent child of a covered employee) for coverage under a group health plan that results from the occurrence of one of the events listed in paragraph (b) of this Q&A-1 is a loss of coverage. In the case of an event that is the bankruptcy of the employer, lose coverage also means any substantial elimination of coverage under the plan, occurring within 12 months before or after the date the bankruptcy proceeding commences, for a covered employee who had retired on or before the date of the substantial elimination of group health plan coverage or for any spouse, surviving spouse, or dependent child of such a covered employee if, on the day before the bankruptcy qualifying event, the spouse, surviving spouse, or dependent child is a beneficiary under the plan. For purposes of this paragraph (c), a loss of coverage need not occur immediately after the event, so long as the loss of coverage occurs before the end of the maximum coverage period (see Q&A-4 and Q&A-6 of § 54.4980B-7). However, if neither the covered employee nor the spouse or a dependent child of the covered employee loses coverage before the end of what would be the maximum coverage period, the event does not satisfy this paragraph (c). If coverage is reduced or eliminated in anticipation of an event (for example, an employer's eliminating an employee's coverage in anticipation of the termination of the employee's employment, or an employee's eliminating the coverage of the employee's spouse in anticipation of a divorce or legal separation), the reduction or elimination is disregarded in determining whether the event causes a loss of coverage.

(d) An event satisfies this paragraph (d) if it occurs while the plan is subject to COBRA. Thus, an event will not satisfy this paragraph (d) if it occurs while the plan is excepted from COBRA (see Q&A-4 of § 54.4980B-2). Even if the plan later becomes subject to COBRA, it is not required to make COBRA continuation coverage available to anyone whose coverage ends as a result of an event during a year in which the plan is excepted from COBRA. For example, if a group health plan is excepted from