

Setting the Record Straight: UnitedHealthcare Negotiations

March 16, 2026

ECU Health has been engaged in discussions with UnitedHealthcare for several months to renew agreements covering Commercial, Medicare Advantage and Medicaid plans. Our goal has always been clear: preserve in-network access for patients while ensuring ECU Health can continue delivering high-quality, sustainable care across eastern North Carolina.

Unfortunately, those discussions have not resulted in an agreement. UnitedHealthcare is currently demanding significant double-digit payment reductions from ECU Health despite years of stagnant reimbursement that has already strained the health system's ability to sustain the care our communities depend on.

ECU Health remains willing to negotiate a responsible agreement at any time. But negotiations require both parties to engage constructively and recognize the realities facing rural health systems.

As public statements about these negotiations have increased, we believe it is important to clarify several key facts.

Setting the Record Straight

1. **ECU Health's proposal addresses years of inadequate reimbursement.**

ECU Health's proposal reflects an effort to move toward fair and sustainable reimbursement after more than a decade of stagnant payment levels. ECU Health hospitals went seven years without a facility rate increase from UnitedHealthcare, and in most other years increases were well below health care inflation. Physicians across our system went six to nine years without reimbursement increases.

UnitedHealthcare has publicly described ECU Health's proposal as a "near 60% increase," but that characterization does not reflect the years of underpayment that preceded the current negotiations.

2. **ECU Health cannot accept payment reductions that threaten access to care.**

ECU Health provides care to more than 1.4 million people across eastern North Carolina, including communities where ECU Health hospitals are the only providers of hospital-based care. As a rural safety-net health system, ECU Health must ensure reimbursement levels are sustainable so we can continue serving our communities.

Instead of addressing years of stagnant reimbursement, UnitedHealthcare is currently demanding double-digit payment reductions. Payment reductions of this magnitude would place additional pressure on a health system that already operates in one of the most challenging health care environments in the country.

3. **Negotiations are not currently active.**

ECU Health remains willing to negotiate a sustainable agreement that protects patient access and supports the long-term stability of care in eastern North Carolina.

However, meaningful negotiations require engagement from both parties. During the most recent discussions, UnitedHealthcare declined to provide counterproposals, refused to respond to proposed contract language, and indicated that continuing negotiations was not a productive use of their time if ECU Health was pursuing termination.

4. This discussion is about sustaining access to care in eastern North Carolina.

ECU Health serves a region where more than 70% of patients are covered by Medicare or Medicaid and where many communities face significant health disparities. In this environment, commercial reimbursement plays a critical role in sustaining access to essential health care services.

Across the country, rural health systems are increasingly being forced to reduce services or close facilities due to financial pressures. Sustainable reimbursement from commercial insurers is essential to ensuring eastern North Carolina communities continue to have access to care close to home.

5. ECU Health has worked to keep care affordable for our communities.

ECU Health is a mission-driven, not-for-profit health system serving one of the most rural and economically challenged regions of North Carolina. For many years, we made the deliberate decision to prioritize patient access and stability over pursuing reimbursement increases, even as inflation, workforce shortages and supply costs rose significantly. ECU Health is not asking UnitedHealthcare to go back and repay those years.

The current reality is simple:

- Over the past eleven years, ECU Health went seven years without a facility reimbursement increase from UnitedHealthcare, and most other years saw increases well below healthcare inflation.
- Our physicians have also gone six of nine years without reimbursement increases.
- During that time, healthcare costs rose dramatically due to inflation, workforce shortages, and supply costs.

Now, instead of addressing those years of stagnant reimbursement, UnitedHealthcare is demanding significant double-digit payment reductions which will be harmful to a rural safety-net health system like ECU Health.

At a time when rural hospitals across the country are struggling to keep essential services open, health insurer policies that reduce reimbursement only increase the risk of losing access to care in communities that already face significant health care challenges.

6. ECU Health remains committed to finding a solution.

Our priority remains protecting access to care for the people of eastern North Carolina. ECU Health remains willing to reach a sustainable agreement with UnitedHealthcare that preserves in-network access for patients while allowing the health system to continue serving our communities for generations to come.