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Utah lets feds, groups promote insurance marketplace

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In this March 23, 2010 file photo, Marcelas Owens of Seattle, left, Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., right, and others, look on as President Barack Obama signs the health care bill in the East Room of the White House in Washington. (J. Scott Applewhite, AP)

SALT LAKE CITY — Utah isn't spending money to promote the new health insurance marketplace for individuals. But as implementation of the federal health law approaches, community and advocacy groups are gearing up to get the word out.

Utah has opted to have the federal government run the marketplace for individuals while the state continues to run its insurance marketplace for small businesses.

As the individual marketplace prepares to open for enrollment in

October, the feds intend to spend about \$1.9 million in Utah to promote public awareness and outreach regarding health insurance changes.

That money is part of a federal effort to pour funding into marketing campaigns across the country, with states that were more receptive to the law receiving more outreach money.

Blue states such as California, Colorado and Connecticut are each receiving more than \$4 per person for outreach or promotion of the law. Utah, a Republican-dominated state where political leaders have been hostile to the law, is getting about 71 cents per person for awareness and outreach to help uninsured residents find coverage.

About \$1.3 million of the federal money is going to 11 health centers in Utah that serve low-income people, according to the Health and Human Services Department. The health centers are expected to use the grants to hire additional staff to help people find coverage.

Another \$600,000 in so-called navigator grants will be awarded in August to community groups to help people find coverage through the federally run marketplace and other ways. Uninsured people are the priority for the public awareness campaign.

In Utah, that's about 14 percent of the state population, or about 400,000 people.

The Utah Health Policy Project, a nonprofit group that advocates for affordable health coverage for all Utah residents, is one of the organizations that applied for the navigator grant.

The group has been vocal for several years about supporting the changes in the law by lobbying the Legislature, sending out news releases and bulletins, and giving presentations to the community.

"We have been talking about this for a long time," said Jason Stevenson, a spokesman for the organization. "Now that the law taking full effect is just around the corner, we're really ramping up those efforts."

The group is planning visits to libraries, senior centers, businesses and student groups to get the word out.

"It is a full-court press and we realize that we're facing some challenging gaps in people's knowledge about the law," Stevenson said.

Stevenson said the group jointly applied for the federal grant with United Way of Salt Lake and the Association of Utah Community Health, two other organizations working to educate people about

the changes that are coming.

The Utah Health Policy Project is also helping to build a network of community groups, ethnic organizations and others to help direct people to their insurance options or refer them to someone who can help with enrollment.

Utah is launching a separate marketing campaign this fall to promote its existing health exchange for small business, said Patricia Conner, director of the Office of Consumer Health Services, which oversees the exchange.

The marketplace, known as Avenue H, has been up and running since 2009.

Conner said the office will also award grants this fall to organizations that want to help promote Avenue H and educate small businesses and individuals.

Utah hasn't spent state money or requested federal funds to promote the individual exchange, but some state agencies are taking steps to prepare for the new law.

The state Department of Workforce Services, which administers programs such as Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, is training staff to assist people who may need help sorting through their coverage options, department spokesman Nic Dunn said.

Dunn said the agency educates hospitals, schools and others that request help to understand the changes.

Workforce Services received some federal money to prepare the system but not to pay for the staff training or education efforts, he said.

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