

Utah's online health marketplace now open

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SALT LAKE CITY -- Utah's federally run online insurance marketplace went live Tuesday as users around the country reported online glitches and long wait times on help hotlines.

Utah is one of 36 states that have opted for federally run marketplaces, and federal officials said they're working to address the glitches as quickly as possible.

Under the health care overhaul, most Americans will be required to have health insurance next year.

The online marketplaces, a hallmark of President Barack Obama's health law, allow people to compare insurance plans and sign up for coverage.

While the federal government will run a Utah online exchange for individuals to shop for coverage, the state is still running its existing exchange for small businesses which was created in 2009.

Utah health advocates say it's hard to predict how many people will sign up using the federal exchange, but on day one, it's likely many people are shopping around and comparing prices.

"It seems that it's pretty popular because we can't get in at the moment," Jason Stevenson, a spokesman for the Utah Health Policy Project, said Tuesday morning. "As expected, there's a couple of hiccups where with the website."

Stevenson said that like the rollout of Medicare Part D in 2006, Stevenson said glitches were to be expected with the launch of a new website.

Tuesday is the beginning of a six-month window to sign up for coverage through the website at www.healthcare.gov, Stevenson pointed out. That should allow time for the system to work out the glitches and for people to enroll.

That window means there shouldn't be any rush or panic to sign up Tuesday, said Karen Crompton, president of the nonprofit Voices for Utah Children, which hosted an open house in Salt Lake City on Tuesday to help people sign up and learn about the health care law.

"The marketplaces are new and many insurance options are being offered for the first time, so we can expect some bumps in the road and confusion along the road," Crompton said at a news conference in Salt Lake City to discuss the website. "Getting more Utahns covered is a journey, not a destination."

One open house attendee, Barry Nakamura of West Valley City, said he will be losing his current insurance at the end of the year and hoped to find out Tuesday about the options and hopefully enroll in a plan.

"End of the year, they'll cut me off, so I need to sign up for something," he said.

Nakamura was directed to three different volunteers before he sat down with a certified application counselor, who explained the changes in the overhaul and how to use the online marketplace.

When Nakamura sat down to a computer to sign up, the website was still experiencing a high volume of traffic and he was unable to get in.

He said the process was a little confusing, and he decided to try again later at home and call into the counselor if he needed help.

"I'm not really sure what's going to happen," he said.

Another open house attendee, Oi Thompson of Sandy, said she was hoping to see a list of the plans and costs spelled out on a piece of paper Tuesday, but was instead directed to the website.

She said she feels like she understands about half of what is happening under the health overhaul, and plans to wait a week before she signs up on the website.

"If this plan works like we understand, it will be easy for us to get the insurance," she said.

- 5 things you need to know about the new health exchange, <http://bit.ly/1520au2>