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Slow start for health overhaul in Utah

By BRADY McCOMBS
Associated Press

About 350 Utah residents signed up for health insurance last month on an online federal marketplace that has been plagued by glitches and delays, the federal government announced Wednesday.

Utah's dismal enrollment figures mirror the results in most of the 36 states relying on the federal website: a mere 27,000 people were able to get health insurance in those states in the first month, figures show.

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

With just 357 people signed up for individual plans, Utah is one of 17 states with fewer than 400 people enrolled.

"It's unfortunate the federal government opened the doors before they were prepared," said Rep. Jim Dunnigan, a Taylorsville Republican, and chair of the state's health reform task force.

There does, however, appear to be thousands more in Utah gearing up to get enrolled. There are nearly 6,200 people who have completed their applications, federal figures show.

"A lot of the work we're doing isn't reflected in the number released," said Jason Stevenson, a spokesman for the Utah Health Policy Project. "There are a lot of people in the pipeline."

Stevenson said his group has been struggling with the federal website, and forced to help people apply on paper or by phone as workarounds. He predicts the numbers will improve in the coming months.

"Just because they haven't pulled the trigger yet doesn't mean they're not going to," Stevenson said. "They are taking their time. They are making a thoughtful decision. They are checking on details."

The insurance marketplaces are a key component of President Barack Obama's health care law, which requires almost all Americans to have health coverage starting next year.

The federal government also announced that 4,800 Utah residents are eligible for Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program.

The total enrollment around the country of 106,000 is about one-fifth the number the Obama administration projected would be enrolled by the first month.

Stevenson said it's no coincidence that states that have promoted their own marketplaces, such as Colorado (4,400 signups) and Washington (7,100), are faring much better than states like

Utah where no money has been spent to promote the new health insurance marketplace for individuals.

Dunnigan said the federal government should have taken Utah's advice and done a test run on the website before unveiling nationwide. That's what Utah did before it opened its health insurance exchange for small businesses in 2009.

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