

AP News

Federal health website better, Utah experts say

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By Michelle L. Price December 06, 2013

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — The diagnosis for the federal government's malfunctioning online insurance marketplace is improving from October when only 350 Utah residents were able to buy insurance, health care experts said Thursday.

Matt Slonaker, the executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project, said the widespread technical troubles combined with political opposition to the health overhaul caused many to wonder if the law was doomed.

"A few short days ago, it seemed as though health care reform was bound for failure," Slonaker said Thursday at a gathering of Utah health care experts. "Today, just a few days later, things have changed a bit."

Federal officials said they fixed hundreds of technical glitches last weekend, and by Thursday, Slonaker said the system was much improved and more people were getting through.

Thursday's conference was organized by the Utah Health Policy Project, a nonprofit that advocates for affordable health coverage and one of the key players in the state working at educating people about the health law.

After the technical repairs last weekend, federal officials reported traffic on the website doubled on Monday. Officials are now expecting a flood of applicants will try to enroll by a Dec. 23 deadline to get covered for 2014.

Slonaker said the floodgates have opened and many more people are signing up, but he wouldn't be surprised if the website still has some glitches down the road.

Phil Sherburne, a Salt Lake City father of three, said he was able to enroll in a plan through the website in early October.

Sherburne, who owns a framing business, said he'd been uninsured for several years but has signed his family up for a plan that will cost \$123 a month.

He told the audience Thursday that he has still not received a bill from the insurance company and has been told there's a problem on the back-end of the website that has prevented his information from being sent to the company.

Despite that, Sherbourne said the steps he's been able to complete have brought him a sense of stability.

"It's really reassuring to know that, come January, we'll have insurance," he said.

Greg Matis, senior counsel with insurer Select Health, said it's too soon to say if large numbers of people will be able to enroll by the end of March to avoid tax penalties.

"Those numbers are just barely now starting to peek up. They were abysmal at first," Matis said. "If the current rate persists, it's not going to be anywhere near what was expected."

Beyond the online marketplace, health experts on Thursday discussed the state's looming decision about Medicaid.

Under the federal health care law, states have the option of expanding eligibility for Medicaid, the state-federal program for low-income people.

The federal government has offered to pick up the full cost of Medicaid expansion through 2016 and 90 percent after that.

Utah leaders, including Republican Gov. Gary Herbert, have said they're worried Washington, D.C., may not be able to keep that promise.

Former Lt. Gov. Greg Bell, who is now the CEO and president of the Utah Hospital Association, said Thursday that he's worried some employers would stop offering plans to their workers if they became eligible for Medicaid.

Bell said he believes Utah will be able to find a unique solution, such as using the money that would have gone toward expanding the program to instead help cover the cost of private plans for those people.

Herbert has said he plans to make a decision on the issue by the time the Legislature meets in late January.