

CMS dispenses \$60 million in outreach grants

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Ninety organizations in 34 states will receive \$60 million in federal grants to help with outreach efforts during the second open enrollment period under the [federal healthcare law](#), the [CMS announced Monday \(PDF\)](#). The grants range from \$30,410 to the Forest County Potawatomi Community in Michigan to \$5.4 million to the University of South Florida.

“In-person assisters have an impact on the lives of so many Americans, helping individuals and families across the country access quality, affordable health coverage,” [HHS Secretary Sylvia Mathews Burwell](#) said in a statement.

Only organizations conducting outreach efforts in states that aren't operating their own exchanges were eligible to apply for the navigator grants. Under the federal law, each state-based marketplace must establish its own navigator program.

Many of the organizations receiving grants worked in a similar capacity during the first open-enrollment period under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. For example, the Utah Health Policy Project helped coordinate a statewide outreach effort known as Take Care Utah. The organization is slated to receive \$485,198 in federal funds to continue that effort in year two.

“Everybody last year was kind of learning as they went,” said Randal Seer, director of Take Care Utah. “This year we'll be ready to hit the ground running.”

Roughly 8 million individuals signed up for private plans through the government run marketplaces in 2014, according to the CMS. Of those, roughly 5.4 million enrolled through the federal HealthCare.gov web site. Those individuals will need to renew their coverage for next year, although the [CMS announced last week](#) that individuals who fail to take action will be automatically re-enrolled in the same plan or the closest comparable plan.

While most individuals involved in outreach efforts applaud that decision, it raises concerns that individuals could end up in more expensive plans or ones that don't meet their coverage needs if they fail to review their options for 2015. That's particularly true because there are expected to be more insurers competing for customers in most states.

“I'm sure most people aren't aware that it would be wise to get on the web site and make sure they're going to be happy with what they have,” Seer said.

Community Health Law Project, in South Orange, N.J., is a newcomer to the federal grant program. During the first open-enrollment period, the not-for-profit group conducted outreach efforts among individuals with mental health and substance abuse issues, helping 160 people sign up for coverage. For the second enrollment period, the group will have a \$350,000 grant to help reach a broader population in four New Jersey counties. Community Health Law Project plans to work with the Employers Association of New Jersey in helping workers with small companies or part-time jobs get coverage.

“The population will be much different than we were doing before,” said Hal Garwin, executive director of Community Health Law Project. “I’m excited about this.”

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