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50K Utah residents pick plans on health website

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By Michelle L. Price / Associated Press

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SALT LAKE CITY — Nearly 50,000 people in Utah have signed up for health insurance next year through the federal online marketplace, according to numbers released Tuesday by the U.S. Health and Human Services Department.

"We're only halfway through open enrollment, and that's a pretty high number already," said Randal Serr, director of the enrollment assistance group Take Care Utah.

Of the 49,740 Utah residents who have signed up, about half are new customers to the website, which is in its second year. The data from Nov. 15 to Dec. 15 represents the first month of open enrollment for 2015 coverage.

Nationally, about 3.4 million people in 37 states have signed up for 2015 insurance through the online marketplace, a signature piece of President Barack Obama's health care law.

The website at healthcare.gov was hobbled by technical difficulties when it debuted in October 2013. Millions who tried to access the site initially were unable to get through.

Many of those technical issues were resolved. By the end of the first open enrollment season, nearly 85,000 people in Utah had signed up, many in the final weeks.

Federal officials have not said how many people in Utah they'd like to see get covered for 2015 through the marketplace, but local advocates hope to see about 100,000 sign up before the Feb. 15 enrollment deadline.

The new numbers show Utah is on track to surpass that goal, Serr said.

"In those last two or three weeks, we're probably going to see a spike in enrollment again," he said. "I would expect us to more than double the number that was released today."

About 89 percent of those who chose plans in Utah are also eligible for federal help paying for their plans, according to Health and Human Services.

Despite Utah's conservative politics and much political opposition to the health care law, the new enrollment numbers show there's a lot of demand for the law, Serr said.

Some Utah plans are cheaper for 2015, but overall costs have increased an average of 5.7 percent this year, according to the Utah Insurance Department. Plan costs can vary based on someone's age, whether they use tobacco and where they live, with rural areas seeing higher rates.

In a mid-level benchmark plan, a 21-year-old nonsmoker in Salt Lake County could see a \$145 monthly premium in 2015, up from \$141 in 2014. In rural Daggett County, the monthly cost for the same plan has remained at about \$167.

The number of plans available varies by county, but in Utah, there are at least 50 options in each county.

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