

Utah residents struggle to get coverage amid overhaul computer problems

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SALT LAKE CITY -- There's still a big educational curb to help residents find out how implementation of the Affordable Care Act -- aka Obamacare -- might impact them, especially if they seek insurance through the federal marketplace, a state official claims.

Randal Serr, Take Care Utah director of the Utah Health Policy Project, said it's no secret a government website to help people sign up for federal health care exchanges has glitches, but he said things are getting better. He suggested there are easy ways to get answers on where to access an exchange, through certified navigators.

"From our experience, generally speaking people don't know too much about how it affects them directly. We've given lots of presentations, but there is still a lot of education that needs to take place," Serr said.

In a morning meeting with the state health reform task force, Serr gave an update on the roll-out of the AFA and told lawmakers his office continues to field 15-20 calls a day from people wanting to know how the law impacts them.

He said www.healthcare.gov has created a way for people to see how the AFA will impact them, without having to create a login account. He said most people are surprised to learn they may qualify for federal subsidies. He said the federal government is working out some of the bugs with the website, and things are getting better.

Serr said a state website, www.takecareutah.org, has an interactive map where people can type in their zip code and find out the closest navigators to their community. People without web access can also call 2-1-1 and get that information, he said.

Serr said many potential navigators in the state have run into problems with the license requirements. He said with the late implementation of rules, it has been a burden for many to meet, but he anticipates eventually there will be 15-16 certified and licensed navigators in the Beehive State.

The Affordable Care Act requires each state-based marketplace must establish a navigator program to help consumers find insurance. Avenue H, which is Utah's program, will utilize navigators for outreach and education to small businesses across the state.

Several lawmakers asked Serr if he had any idea of how many people in the state had signed up for the exchange and he said those numbers are not available.

Rep. Jim Dunnigan, R-Taylorsville, said health insurance agents can also be a good source for people to get more information about the federal program. He said many have been trained in Avenue H or the exchange programs for people in Utah.

"I won't editorialize on the federal government right now. It's not operational. They're operating. It doesn't mean they are operational," Dunnigan said.