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Obamacare 'surge' persists into 2014 in some states

Thu, Jan 16 2014

By Sharon Begley

NEW YORK, Jan 15 (Reuters) - The late-December surge that pushed enrollment in private health insurance plans under Obamacare past 2.1 million people continued into 2014, officials of several state-run insurance marketplaces said on Wednesday.

It was encouraging news for White House hopes of signing up 7 million Americans by March 31, the deadline for 2014 coverage under President Barack Obama's healthcare law.

That goal has appeared elusive due to the disastrous performance of HealthCare.gov, the federal enrollment portal through which Americans in 36 states sign up to buy health insurance, in October and November, even as the websites of many of the 15 state-run exchanges fared better.

The Washington Health Benefit Exchange has had about 8,000 enrollments in private health plans since late December, bringing the total to just over 73,000. "We doubled our call-center staff in December" to handle the end-of-year surge, said Richard K. Onizuka, chief executive of the exchange, in a conference call arranged by the nonprofit healthcare advocacy group Families USA. "And now we're almost doubling it again."

The deadline is Wednesday for coverage that starts on February 1. For coverage that begins on March 1, consumers must enroll by Feb. 15. Those who do not have insurance must enroll by March 31 or incur a tax penalty.

Kentucky, whose Democratic Gov. Steve Beshear has been an enthusiastic supporter of Obama's Affordable Care Act, has been logging about 2,000 simultaneous users on its website in January, said Carrie Banahan, executive director of the Kentucky Health Benefit Exchange. That compares with 600 before the December surge, when "Kynect" topped 33,000 enrollments in private health insurance. Banahan did not release January enrollment figures.

Connecticut enrolled about 36,000 people in private health plans through late December, spokeswoman Kathleen Tallarita said. Since then it has enrolled "in some cases, 500 to 1,000 in a week," which would put it behind 2013's pace. The state will release January enrollment figures on Thursday.

New York also "is seeing an increase in call volume as we approach today's deadline," said Danielle Hollihan, deputy director of New York State of Health, referring to the Jan. 15 cut-off for coverage beginning Feb. 1. New York has been enrolling about 7,000 people per day in private plans and Medicaid in January, she said, compared with a total of about 230,000 from Oct. 1 through late December.

California, whose 500,000 private-plan enrollments through December lead all states, has not released January numbers, but said it continued "to see a tremendous amount of interest."

Data on sign-up activity for HealthCare.gov in the last two weeks was not available.

Virtually every state is trying to pump up enrollment by young adults, since those aged 18 to 34 so far account for only 24 percent of enrollees nationwide, the Obama administration announced on Monday.

The program needs a higher proportion of younger members, who tend to be healthier and, therefore, less likely to need the costliest medical care, to offset expenses for sicker beneficiaries.

On Thursday, Covered California will hold a six-hour extravaganza at YouTube studios in Los Angeles, with a live broadcast of what it calls "a range of viral entertainment geared toward millennials about the importance of getting covered." (Reporting by Sharon Begley; Editing by Michele Gershberg and Gunna Dickson)

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