

US health care lottery: luck of the draw in Virginia

November 21 2013, by Fabienne Faur

Mossamat Jhumu is tickled pink, as she has just won the lottery in Virginia. However, the prize is not money or merchandise but free health care.

On a cold November morning, this 39-year-old woman of Bangladeshi origin was among 100 people waiting patiently outside the sleek, modern Arlington Free Clinic in the Washington suburbs.

Jhumu, a naturalized US citizen, said it was the fourth time she had tried her luck. She is among 48 million Americans who have no health insurance.

Around 10 percent of the residents of Arlington have no [health insurance](#), said Jody Steiner Kelly, the clinic's administrative director.

They can go to the emergency room if need be but "for people who lack comprehensive primary care, we are here as one of the safety net options," said Steiner Kelly.

So once a month, the private clinic funded by donations holds a lottery, with 20 to 25 winners.

Winners have to be verified as eligible and after that they can get care for anything from a bad back to cancer.

"Most of the people that come to us have some type of chronic

condition," Steiner Kelly said. Many have waited until the last minute to choose between buying food, paying the rent or trying to get healthy.

Doctors are too expensive

In Virginia, the situation is particularly touchy for 400,000 poor people at the center of a political battle over Obamacare, President Barack Obama's fitful drive to get [health care](#) to those who lack it.

Republicans, who control the Virginia legislature, oppose extending Medicaid—the US [health care program](#) for the poor—to more people. This is an option included in Obamacare.

But the state just elected a Democratic governor, Terry McAuliffe, who made such an extension a key part of his campaign platform.

More than 20 Republican-run states refuse to extend Medicaid, calling such a move too expensive.

Jhumu has already tried twice to access the Obamacare website offering health care plans—a site plagued by myriad technical snafus in a huge embarrassment for the president.

"I'm just waiting till they fix the system and so hopefully we can go and get one," she said before getting in line to sign up for a lottery ticket.

The patients then sit and wait for the results.

A young Salvadoran woman named Claudia, who says she is in the United States illegally, has a bad foot and needs X-rays to see what the problem is.

"I cannot see a doctor because it is too expensive," said the 28-year-old.

Without papers, she cannot get insurance under the president's plan.

Greg Bennett, a 60-year-old American with heart trouble, said times are indeed hard.

"The problem with most people is that they've got some money but the liquidity is low," he said

"If you drive across America, there is a lot of stuff for sale on the side of the roads—water skis, cars, motorcycles," Bennett said.

Steiner Kelly, with the help of a translator, tells the Spanish-speaking hopefuls what the rules are.

"The clinic is for adults only. We don't see children here. We don't see full-time college students here. You must have been in the US for one complete year," she said

Cheers ring out as the winning numbers are drawn.

Eventually, Jhumu's number 15 comes up.

"Looks like a jackpot!," she said.

She has won the right to join 1,700 patients treated at the clinic, either being admitted or on an outpatient basis, by volunteer doctors.

Steiner Kelly says she is eager for Obamacare to get up and running.

"For every patient we can help get insurance who is eligible to get insurance, for every patient we move into the insured, then we can take care of someone that we previously wouldn't be able to," she said.

As the losers walk away in silence, she reminds them the next lottery is December 10.

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