

# US health official apologizes for Obamacare site (Update)

October 30 2013, by Steven R. Hurst

---



In this Oct. 21, 2013 file photo, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius arrives in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington for an event with President Barack Obama on the initial rollout of the health care overhaul. As the public face of President Barack Obama's signature health care program, Sebelius has become the target for attacks over its botched rollout. Republicans want her to resign and even some Democrats \_ while not mentioning her name \_ say someone needs to be fired. (AP Photo/ Evan Vucci, File)

Partisan sparks were flying in Congress on Tuesday as President Barack Obama's top health official apologized for wasting consumers' time as they tried to use the crippled website that allows them to buy government mandated health insurance under the overhaul known as Obamacare.

Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said the access problems for the online portal were "miserably frustrating" and that she takes the blame for fixing the system by the end of November. She said the website was improving daily, but as the hearing got underway, consumers trying to log in from Virginia got this message: "The system is down at the moment."

"Hold me accountable for the debacle," she said at the opening of a contentious hearing before the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee. "I'm responsible."

Beyond the bungled start-up of the massive overhaul, Republicans have argued the troubled website' glitches are proof the government is incapable of managing the complex program.

Obama's White House legacy depends heavily on whether his massive overhaul of the U.S. health care system will succeed, and so far it's been an embarrassment. The United States had been the largest developed nation without a national health care system.

Sebelius testified as another controversy brewed over a wave of cancellation notices hitting small businesses and individuals who buy their own insurance. Republicans say that contradicts one of Obama's earliest promises about the health law: You can keep your plan if you like it. Obama's promise dates back to June 2009, when Congress was starting to grapple with how to cover millions of uninsured Americans.

The cancellations affect some of the 5 percent of Americans who buy health insurance on the private market. The rest have coverage through their employers or through the Medicare and Medicaid programs for the elderly and poor. The cancellations affect policyholders whose coverage now falls short of new standards in the health care law.

Republican Rep. Marsha Blackburn, a fiery opponent of the legislation, said those cancellations were denying Americans a choice as promised by the president.



In this Oct. 24, 2013 file photo, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius speaks in Phoenix. As the public face of President Barack Obama's signature health care program, Sebelius has become the target for attacks over its botched rollout. Republicans want her to resign and even some Democrats \_ while not mentioning her name \_ say someone needs to be fired. (AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin, File)

"Some people like to drive a Ford, not a Ferrari, and some people like to drink out of a red Solo (plastic) cup and not a crystal stem. You're taking away their choice," Blackburn said.

Beyond that were new questions about security of the website.

An internal government memo obtained by The Associated Press shows administration officials were concerned that a lack of testing posed a high security risk for the troubled website.

The Sept. 27 memo to Medicare and Medicaid chief Marylin Tavenner said a website contractor was not able to test all the security controls in one complete version of the system. Insufficient testing "exposed a level of uncertainty that can be deemed as a high risk," the memo said.

The memo recommended setting up a security team to address risks, conduct daily tests, and a full security test within two to three months of going live.

"You accepted a risk on behalf of every user...that put their personal financial information at risk," Republican Rep. Mike Rogers told Sebelius during questioning. "Amazon would never do this ... This is completely an unacceptable level of security."

Sebelius countered that the system is secure, even though the site has a temporary certificate, known in government parlance as an "authority to operate." Sebelius said a permanent certificate will only be issued once all security issues are addressed.



Marilyn Tavenner, the administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, goes over her notes on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, Oct. 29, 2013, prior to testifying before the House Ways and Means Committee hearing on the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Stressing that improvements are happening daily, the senior Obama official closest to the administration's malfunctioning health care website apologized Tuesday for problems that have kept Americans from successfully signing up for coverage. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

Added spokeswoman Joanne Peters: "When consumers fill out their online...applications, they can trust that the information they're providing is protected by stringent security standards and that the technology underlying the application process has been tested and is secure. Security testing happens on an ongoing basis using industry best practices."

As Sebelius testified before the House Energy and Commerce

Committee, growing number of Republicans in Congress are calling for Obama to fire her.

Obama was traveling to Boston where planned to speak about the embattled law Wednesday from Boston's historic Faneuil Hall, where Massachusetts Republican Gov. Mitt Romney was joined by the late Democratic Sen. Ted Kennedy to sign the state's 2006 health care overhaul bill, a model for Obamacare. Obama was pointing to the bipartisan effort to get the program launched in Massachusetts to encourage his opponents to stop rooting for his law's failure.

The White House said Obama planned to point out Massachusetts' sluggish start. Jonathan Gruber, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology economics professor who advised both Romney and Obama on the development of their laws, said only 123 paying consumers signed up the first month of the Massachusetts law, with 36,000 coming on by the time penalties kicked in for failing to have insurance.



House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Rep. Dave Camp , R-Mich., center, flanked by the committee's ranking Democrat, Rep. Sander Levin, D-Mich., right, and Rep. Sam Johnson, R-Texas, makes an opening statement on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, Oct. 29, 2013, during the committee's hearing with Marilyn Tavenner, the administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services on the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Stressing that improvements are happening daily, the senior Obama official closest to the administration's malfunctioning health care website apologized Tuesday for problems that have kept Americans from successfully signing up for coverage. Rep. Todd Young, R-Ind. is at left. (AP Photo/ Evan Vucci)

While more people did sign up as the deadline approached in Massachusetts, its law never faced high-profile computer woes or such fierce opposition. Even though the federal law was modeled on Romney's, the former governor ran for president against Obama last year on a campaign to repeal the federal version.

The law doesn't create a government-run system like Britain's, but it does mandate that large employers provide insurance and that everyone must be insured or face tax penalties. Those who can't afford insurance can receive subsidies in states that accepted federal money for an expansion of the Medicaid program for low-income Americans. Several Republican-governed states rejected the federal money and are not expanding Medicaid.

© 2013 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: US health official apologizes for Obamacare site (Update) (2013, October 30) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-10-health-obamacare-site.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.