'Obamacare' complexity blamed for tech glitches

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Confusion over various elements of a vast online apparatus bogged down the US health care website's debut, contractors will tell lawmakers Thursday at a hearing probing the troubled "Obamacare" rollout.

Furious Republicans have demanded answers about problems plaguing the new system, while the White House acknowledged more technical hangups with President Barack Obama's signature health care reforms.

Obama is facing a barrage of criticism for failures stemming from this month's debut of Healthcare.gov, through which millions of Americans are expected to buy insurance.

The process has been overwhelmed by technical glitches on the website, which critics have blasted as a half-billion-dollar disaster.

The Washington Post reported late Wednesday that the government will now give people extra time to obtain coverage or pay a penalty. It quoted an official in the Department of Health and Human Services.

The paper quoted the official as saying this is not related to the technical glitches but rather to confusion over one aspect of the timing of the law—under which for the first time most Americans have to buy health insurance or face a penalty.

The doubt was over whether people had to be covered by the end of an enrollment period that concludes March 31, or simply have purchased a

health plan by then. These have a lag time before they take effect.

The administration official said the new rule is that simply buying into a plan at any point during the enrollment period will spare people from paying the fine.

The House of Representatives' Republican leadership—long opposed to the reform—has seized the opportunity to schedule three hearings, including a panel on Thursday where contractors involved in the nuts and bolts of the website will likely face a hostile reception.

The contractors will argue that the website serves as a "complex transaction processor" that links millions of customers in real time to federal databases like those of the Social Security Administration as well as to those of more than 170 insurance carriers, and that the initial high volume of users clogged the system.

"Unfortunately, in systems this complex with so many concurrent users, it is not unusual to discover problems that need to be addressed once the software goes into a live production environment," CGI Federal senior vice president Cheryl Campbell will tell the House Energy and Commerce Committee according to prepared remarks released late Wednesday.

"This is true regardless of the level of formal end-to-end performance testing," according to Campbell's testimony.

"No amount of testing within reasonable time limits can adequately replicate a live environment of this nature."

She said a main problem arose at the entryway to the system, where the requirement to create a secure account caused "a bottleneck that prevented the vast majority of users from accessing" the exchanges.

Meanwhile, the latest response from the White House suggested the problems might be deeper than an expensive Web interface.

On Wednesday, 14 health insurance chief executives met with White House officials and under-fire Health Secretary Kathleen Sebelius to discuss the hiccups.

The White House admitted these were not confined to online operations but also to the so-called "834 forms," which the health care marketplace uses to transmit enrollee data to insurance firms.

"We have worked with the insurers and the 'alpha teams' (of technology experts) to iron out kinks in the both the 834 forms and in direct enrollment," the White House said.

This behind-the-scenes problem could prove nightmarish if insurance firms get wrongly-coded information for people who sign up for Obamacare.

Andy Slavitt, group executive [vice president](link) of contractor Optum, will testify that the Data Services Hub—which his company produced as a pipeline to transfer data between consumers and secure servers—"has performed well" by processing hundreds of thousands of data exchanges per day.

But Healthcare.gov was simply "inundated" by high volume, he said.

"Many of the critical components developed by these multiple vendors were overwhelmed—the virtual data center environment, the software, the database system, and the hardware, as well as our EIDM (identification management) tool."

With many up in arms about the problems, Health and Human Services

(HHS) staff briefed top House Democrats Wednesday about the ways forward—but Republicans were left out.

House Democratic Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi said there was no talk in the meeting of delaying the law's so-called individual mandate, which compels Americans to have [health](link) insurance by January 1 or pay a fine.

Despite expressing "faith in technology," Pelosi acknowledged the hiccups were "unacceptable."

"Just fix it," she said.

Democratic Senator Joe Manchin broke ranks with Obama and Pelosi to say he believed it was time for a delay of the individual mandate to give the administration a year to "work out the kinks."

"Ours has a certainty of time, January 1, 2015," Manchin told Fox News late Wednesday.

"No fines whatsoever, transition in, work out the kinks. Let's fix this thing."

Sebelius, whom critics have said should resign over the poor rollout, declined to testify at Thursday's hearing but she is expected to appear before the committee next week.

Committee chairman Fred Upton has promised a "pretty tough grilling."

A third hearing, in the House Ways and Means Committee, will be held Tuesday, with a senior HHS official testifying.

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