Design and software problems plague health exchanges

October 7 2013, by Karen Pallarito, Healthday Reporter

Efforts to improve the federal registration website are under way, officials say.

(HealthDay)—Problems signing up for health insurance through HealthCare.gov, the federal website serving health exchanges in 36 states, are the result of design and software problems, *The Wall Street Journal* reported.

Although the Obama administration last week blamed high traffic for most of the problems, federal health officials said Sunday that design changes and greater server capacity are needed to improve the online marketplace, the *Journal* reported.

"We can do better and we are working around the clock to do so," Joanne Peters, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), told the newspaper.

Information technology experts consulted by the *Journal* said the site appeared to be "built on a sloppy software foundation."

HealthCare.gov stumbled out of the gate last Tuesday—the first day of open enrollment under the Affordable Care Act—as consumers tried to peruse their health-plan options and enroll in coverage.

In the hours and days after its launch, consumers encountered long lag times and technical difficulties.

U.S. health officials see the heavy traffic as an indication of the demand for health insurance. The administration hopes to enroll 7 million uninsured people through the federal and state health exchanges by the end of March 2014.

Along with online system issues, the volume of users last week apparently played a role in overwhelming the government marketplace.

In an interview with U.S. Chief Technology Officer Todd Park, *USA Today* reported on Sunday that the government website was overwhelmed, with five times more users than it was designed to handle.

Although 50,000 to 60,000 simultaneous users were expected, the site drew up to 250,000 users at a time since the Oct. 1 launch, Park said.

"These bugs were functions of volume," he told the newspaper. "Take away the volume and it works."

HHS did not respond immediately to a *HealthDay* request seeking further explanation of apparent contradictions between the article in *The Wall Street Journal* pointing to underlying system problems and Park's remarks suggesting that traffic alone crippled the website.

The government said, however, that its response to the overwhelming demand is beginning to show results.

"Call center wait times are seconds, not minutes, and people have been enrolling over the phone 24/7," Peters said Monday in a prepared statement. "Our work to expand the site's capacity has led to more people successfully applying for and enrolling in affordable health coverage online, with wait times being shortened by approximately 50 percent since Friday."

Federal health officials have yet to disclose how many people enrolled in health plans through the federally operated marketplace last week.

Karen Ignagni, president and CEO of America's Health Insurance Plans, a trade association for the health insurance industry, confirmed in a statement that plans across the country "are receiving enrollments from the federal exchange."

  More information: Here's how to find the health exchange serving your state.

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