

Obama apologizes to Americans losing coverage

November 7 2013, by Steven R. Hurst



In this Oct. 30, 2013, file photo, President Barack Obama speaks at Boston's historic Faneuil Hall about the federal health care law. Obama says he's sorry Americans are losing health insurance plans he repeatedly said they could keep under his signature health care law. But the president stopped short of apologizing for making those promises in the first place. "I am sorry that they are finding themselves in this situation based on assurances they got from me," he said in an interview Thursday, Nov. 7 with NBC News. (AP Photo/Stephan Savoia, File)

President Barack Obama, who promised his health care overhaul would allow Americans to keep their health insurance plans, has apologized to the at least 3.5 million people who are losing their coverage because their plans have been determined as substandard under the new law.

Obama is facing enormous criticism and political heat for having repeatedly made a promise he couldn't keep. That has been compounded the bungled Oct. 1 online roll-out of the program known as Obamacare, after severe technical problems crippled a website meant to be a portal for Americans wanting to buy or change coverage.

Obama, in an interview Thursday with NBC News, pledged to find fixes that might allow people to keep their coverage that had been cancelled.

While apologizing to Americans who lost their policies, the president did not address directly his promises in the years leading up to Obamacare's debut.

"I am sorry that they are finding themselves in this situation based on assurances they got from me," Obama said.

The Affordable Care Act, passed by Congress in 2010, is likely to be the legacy-setting legislation of Obama's presidency. It was designed to provide affordable health insurance to the tens of millions of Americans who did not have health coverage.

Some 80 percent of Americans are insured through their workplace. For those who had to buy insurance as individuals on the open market, coverage was often far too expensive. Others who wanted insurance could be refused coverage because of existing health problems—a practice that has been banned by the law.

The stumbling launch of new consumer marketplaces unleashed a wave

of criticism after the troubled website was unable to handle the flood of online shoppers. Top Obama administration officials have apologized before Congress for the glitches that froze computer screens across America. The administration has promised the website will be running properly by the end of this month.

Given the uproar over the website and the policy cancellations, Obama said: "We've got to work hard to make sure that they know we hear them, and we are going to do everything we can to deal with folks who find themselves in a tough position as a consequence of this."

Officials said the president was referring to fixes his administration could make on its own, not legislative options proposed by congressional lawmakers. Republicans have made rescinding the health care law a central goal in Congress, remaining fierce opponents of the law three years after it won congressional approval. Members of the House of Representatives aligned with the conservative tea party movement hoped to derail Obamacare by instigating last month's 16-day partial government shutdown and bringing the U.S. to the brink of a debt default.

While that effort failed and badly undermined Republican approval ratings, the party has been given a political opening by Obamacare's problems and has loudly criticized the president for repeatedly promising Americans they could keep their health coverage if they liked it.

The law made that promise almost impossible to keep. It mandated that insurance coverage must meet certain standards and that policies falling short would no longer be valid, meaning some policies were doomed to disappear.

The White House says under those guidelines, fewer than 5 percent of Americans will have to change their coverage. Administration officials

pledge that those forced to change plans will end up with better coverage and that subsidies offered by the government will help offset any increased costs.

Republicans have attacked the credibility of such promises and appeared unmoved by Obama's mea culpa.

"If the president is truly sorry for breaking his promises to the American people, he'll do more than just issue a halfhearted apology on TV," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said in a statement.

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Citation: Obama apologizes to Americans losing coverage (2013, November 7) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-11-obama-americans.html>

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