

Ex-Microsoft executive to take over overhaul of health care website

December 18 2013, by Kyung M. Song

Kurt DelBene, who relinquished his post as president of Microsoft Office in July amid a corporate shake-up, is starting a short-term gig Wednesday - as chief fixer for the troubled federal health insurance website.

President Barack Obama on Tuesday tapped DelBene to take over for Jeffrey Zients, another millionaire business executive who was brought in temporarily two months ago to overhaul the online health exchange.

Healthcare.gov, a massive platform built by contractors, has been a political debacle because of serious technical problems since its Oct. 1 debut.

DelBene's appointment to the job came after he volunteered his services to the White House in October as officials were casting for private-sector rescuers. DelBene's wife, U.S. Rep. Suzan DelBene, D-Wash., relayed her husband's contact information to the White House.

On Oct. 22, Obama brought back Zients, a former administration budget director, to fix the website. But Zients is scheduled to become director of the National Economic Council early next year.

Kurt DelBene's assignment, officially senior adviser to Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of Health and Human Services, is expected to last about six months. Kurt DelBene, whose 2012 Microsoft salary, stock awards and other compensation totaled \$7.9 million, will work for free,

said Viet Shelton, spokesman for Suzan DelBene, a former Microsoft vice president herself.

Kurt DelBene, 53, stepped down as head of one of Microsoft's largest and most profitable divisions in July as part of a corporate reorganization announced by Chief Executive Steve Ballmer.

Kurt DelBene said he would retire by year's end, winding down a 21-year career with the company. Since July he has served as special adviser to Qi Lu, executive vice president of Microsoft's Applications and Services Group. That stint ended Monday.

Personable and soft-spoken, Kurt DelBene is well regarded for his managerial chops. He led the Business division as it introduced Office 365, an online subscription version of the productivity suite that's one of Microsoft's financial pillars. While Microsoft has been described by some as a political snake pit, Kurt DelBene wasn't known to engage as a combatant.

Ballmer and Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates said Kurt DelBene possesses the technical and organizational savvy needed for his new task.

Kurt DelBene is a "phenomenal leader who established Microsoft Office as a world-class service for billions of people. Clearly, Kurt's technical and business skills will be invaluable in his new endeavor," Ballmer said in a statement.

Kurt DelBene could not be reached for comment.

Since 2009, Kurt DeBene has donated more than \$21,000 to several congressional Democrats, including Washington Sens. Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray and House Whip Steny Hoyer of Maryland. He has not contributed to Obama's presidential campaigns.

Righting Healthcare.gov will be a sizable challenge. Though Zients has declared the website "night and day from where it was Oct. 1," some users in 36 states that rely on the federal exchange continue to encounter glitches and bottlenecks.

Much more than a website, Healthcare.gov is a one-stop platform where consumers can compare insurance plans and sign up for individual coverage, enrollment data is transmitted to insurers, federal subsidies are calculated, and income information is sent to the Internal Revenue Service for verification.

The Obama administration is racing to meet the Dec. 23 deadline under the Affordable Care Act for Americans to obtain health coverage that kicks in Jan. 1. After March 31, those without insurance could face penalties.

Last month, Suzan DelBene broke from a majority of House Democrats and voted to let insurers keep selling canceled health plans that don't meet new federal minimum-coverage requirements. Obama and many Democrats argued against it, saying it would undermine risk pools by allowing some Americans to opt for selective and skimpy - and cheaper - coverage.

Suzan DelBene explained her vote as an attempt to give relief to people who were affected by the botched website rollout and "penalized by the administration's broken promises." Obama had repeatedly said that anyone who was happy with their health care plan could keep it - an assertion that didn't prove true.

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Citation: Ex-Microsoft executive to take over overhaul of health care website (2013, December

18) retrieved 12 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-12-ex-microsoft-overhaul-health-website.html>

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