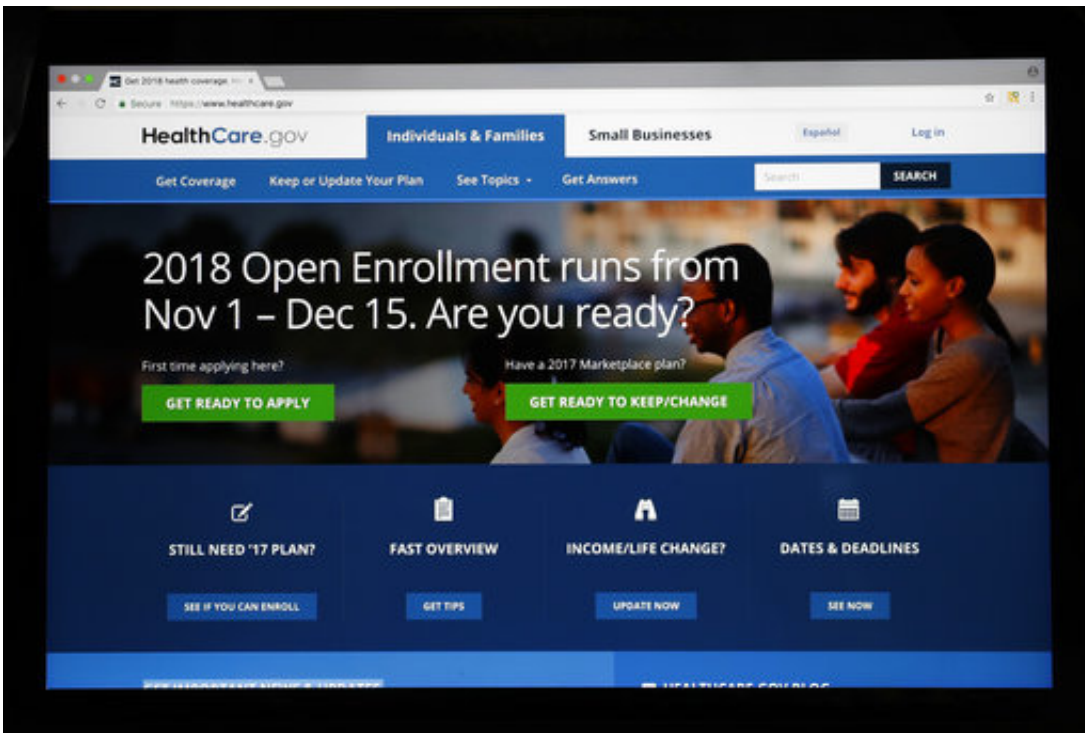


# Despite Trump's scorn, early 'Obamacare' sign-ups top 600k

November 9 2017, by Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar



The Healthcare.gov website is seen on a computer screen Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2017, in Washington. The government says more than 600,000 people signed up for Affordable Care Act coverage in the first week of open enrollment season, and nearly 8 in 10 of those were current customers renewing their coverage. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Despite President Donald Trump's efforts to take down "Obamacare," more than 600,000 people signed up for coverage the first week of open

enrollment, the government said Thursday.

With only four days of data, experts said it's hard to discern a trend. But definitely the Affordable Care Act doesn't seem to be collapsing. If anything sign-ups for 2018 are on track with previous years.

Figures from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services showed that 601,462 people signed up Nov. 1-4 in the 39 states served by the federal HealthCare.gov website. Of those consumers, about 77 percent were renewing their coverage, and about 23 percent were new customers, a split that mirrors previous years.

Because sign-ups for states running their own health insurance markets are not included in the early data, overall national enrollment is guaranteed to be higher.

"It's quite clear that the ACA is still functioning, and functioning reasonably well," said Larry Levitt of the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation.

Sign-ups on a daily basis are up, he added, "but these numbers don't necessarily tell you whether enrollment is going to end up higher or lower."

Enacted under former President Barack Obama, the health care law offers subsidized private insurance to people who don't have coverage on the job. This year's enrollment numbers are being closely watched because of the Trump administration's disdain for the program.

Trump has repeatedly tweeted that "Obamacare" is collapsing or imploding. He abruptly stopped payments that reimburse insurers for providing lower copays and deductibles to low-income people, contributing to a spike in premiums. His administration cut the sign-up

season in half, slashed the advertising budget, and dialed back on counselors who help consumers enroll.

But all the political turmoil hasn't had a dramatic impact on enrollment, at least not yet.

"If there was sabotage, you would expect to see these numbers substantially lower in the beginning of the year, because people wouldn't know it was open enrollment season," said Chris Sloan, a senior manager with the health industry consulting firm Avalere Health.

The numbers don't seem to indicate a surge in consumer interest either, he added. "If there was a surge, you would expect these numbers to be substantially higher," Sloan said.

Separately, a study of the federal HealthCare.gov website for The Associated Press by the technology firm Catchpoint found it running smoothly from Nov. 1-9. Catchpoint monitors consumer experience with major business websites.

Administration spokesman Johnathan Monroe said when it comes to consumer service, the aim is "a seamless open enrollment experience."

The seemingly drama-free start to sign-ups doesn't mean an end to concerns about the Trump administration's stewardship.

Open enrollment will end much earlier this time, on Dec. 15. Since there's usually a surge of procrastinators at the end, what happens in the last week of sign-up season will be critical. The Obama administration allowed consumers in the queue by a deadline on the last day to finish later. It's unclear if the Trump administration will stick with that.

Separately, acting counter to Trump's efforts to unravel "Obamacare,"

millions of consumers eligible for income-based financial assistance will have access to basic "bronze" plans for no monthly premium. Some experts that quirk this year could increase enrollment.

The Kaiser foundation estimates 4.5 million uninsured people are eligible for subsidies that would allow them to get a free bronze plan for 2018.

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Citation: Despite Trump's scorn, early 'Obamacare' sign-ups top 600k (2017, November 9) retrieved 24 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-11-obamacare-sign-ups-600k-week.html>

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