

Strong showing for Obama health law as nearly 9M sign up

December 21 2017, by Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar



In this Oct. 18, 2017 photo, the Healthcare.gov website is seen on a computer screen in Washington. The government says about 8.8 million people have signed up for coverage next year under the Affordable Care Act. A deadline surge last week appears to account for the surprisingly strong numbers. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

About 8.8 million people have signed up for coverage next year under the Affordable Care Act, the government said Thursday. The

surprisingly strong numbers come after a deadline surge last week.

The update came via Twitter from Seema Verma, head of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Total national sign-ups won't be known for weeks, as some states with later deadlines continue to enroll customers.

A detailed breakdown was not immediately available, but last year the 39 states served by the federal HealthCare.gov website enrolled 9.2 million people. The figure this year had been expected to be much lower, partly because President Donald Trump and the GOP-led Congress repeatedly tried to take down the entire program.

"This number is higher than anyone expected, and has to be considered a success," said Larry Levitt of the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation.

The numbers come a day after Trump proclaimed that the GOP tax bill "essentially repealed Obamacare." But the tax overhaul only repealed the health law's fines on people who don't carry health insurance, starting in 2019.

Other major elements of the Obama-era law remain in place, including its Medicaid expansion tailored to low-income adults, protections for people with pre-existing medical conditions, subsidies to help consumers pay their premiums, and requirements that insurers cover "essential" health benefits.

This year the Trump administration cut open enrollment season in half, ending it Dec. 15 instead of Jan. 31.

It also slashed the advertising budget and cut back funding for counselors who help people go through the complicated process of enrollment. That involves more than picking a health plan—consumers

also have to estimate their income for next year to qualify for financial help.

However, the administration also took steps to facilitate enrollment, such as creating an easier path for insurers and brokers to sign up customers.

In her Twitter messages, Verma struck an upbeat tone:

"We take pride in providing great customer service," she wrote, congratulating her agency on "the smoothest experience for consumers to date."

That contrasts with the president's often ominous rhetoric about "Obamacare," a legacy of his predecessor that Trump still seems to be trying to dismantle.

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