

Obama health care law posts respectable sign-up season

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In this June 10, 2105 file photo, Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia Burwell testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington. The Obama administration says 12.7 million people signed up for private insurance or renewed coverage under the president's health care law, respectable results for a program still in political jeopardy. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta, File)

Still facing political jeopardy, President Barack Obama's health care law beat expectations by earning solid sign-ups this year, according to figures released Thursday by the administration.

About 12.7 million people signed up for individual private insurance policies or renewed their coverage for 2016, said Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia M. Burwell. That means Republicans running in this year's elections may find it harder to deliver on their promise of repeal, while Democrats may yet be able to tap the newly insured as a voting constituency.

"It's not the unequivocal success that Obamacare advocates had hoped for, but also not the disaster that critics thought could make it a talking point on the campaign trail," Larry Levitt, of the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation, said.

Expectations were low at the start of open enrollment on Nov. 1. Premiums have been going up, and many of the remaining uninsured are considered skeptics.

The 12.7 million number falls right in the middle of the administration's projection of 11 million to 14 million initial enrollments through HealthCare.gov and state-run counterparts. The administration says this year's numbers are more accurate because early cancellations have been winnowed out.

Separately, another 400,000 signed up in a new kind of health law plan for low-income people. Minnesota and New York are the first states to offer it.

Nonetheless, enrollment tends to dwindle over the year. Some people leave for employer coverage while other customers can't keep up with the costs, even with considerable financial help from the government.

Burwell has set customer retention as the ultimate goal. Her target is 10 million consumers still signed up and paying premiums at the end of the year. The administration seems on track to end Obama's final year in office just above that goal, said Avalere Health, a research and consulting firm.

This year was the third sign-up season for the Affordable Care Act, and different challenges emerged. The problem wasn't the HealthCare.gov website, which is faster, more reliable and easier to use. The issues involved the cost of coverage, the motivations of millions of people who remain uninsured, and the complexity of Obama's signature law.

Premiums went up for the private, taxpayer-subsidized coverage sold through HealthCare.gov and state insurance markets. Many of the more than 10 million eligible uninsured Americans tended to be younger people on tight budgets, with rent,

education loans and car payments to juggle.

The 2016 enrollment number surpassed last year's mark of nearly 11.7 million sign-ups.

Critics were unimpressed. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, called this year's sign-ups "anemic," and the health law's coverage "unpopular, unaffordable and unworkable."

Some insurers say customers appeared to be better informed and more engaged this year. Instead of a big spike on the Jan. 31 sign-up deadline, insurers say they saw steady traffic throughout last week.

Procrastinators may have been swayed by a sharp increase in fines on those who remain uninsured. For 2016, the penalty will rise to \$695 or 2.5 percent of taxable income, whichever is higher.

The health law has added coverage in two major ways: Online insurance markets like HealthCare.gov offer subsidized private plans to people who don't have coverage on the job, and states have the option of a Medicaid expansion aimed at low-income adults. Thirty-one states, plus Washington, D.C., have expanded their Medicaid programs.

More than 14 percent of Americans were uninsured in 2013 before the health care law's big coverage expansion. That share dropped to 9 percent last year, according to the government. More than 16 million people gained coverage from the end of 2013 to the middle of last year.

Republicans remain committed to repealing "Obamacare," and every GOP presidential candidate has vowed to deliver on that promise.

Among the Democratic contenders, Hillary Clinton would make changes geared to improving the health care law, while Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders would incorporate all current health programs into a new government-run system that would also absorb employer-provided and individually purchased insurance.

Polls show the public remains divided over Obama's law.

More information: HHS enrollment report: tinyurl.com/hccg82z

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