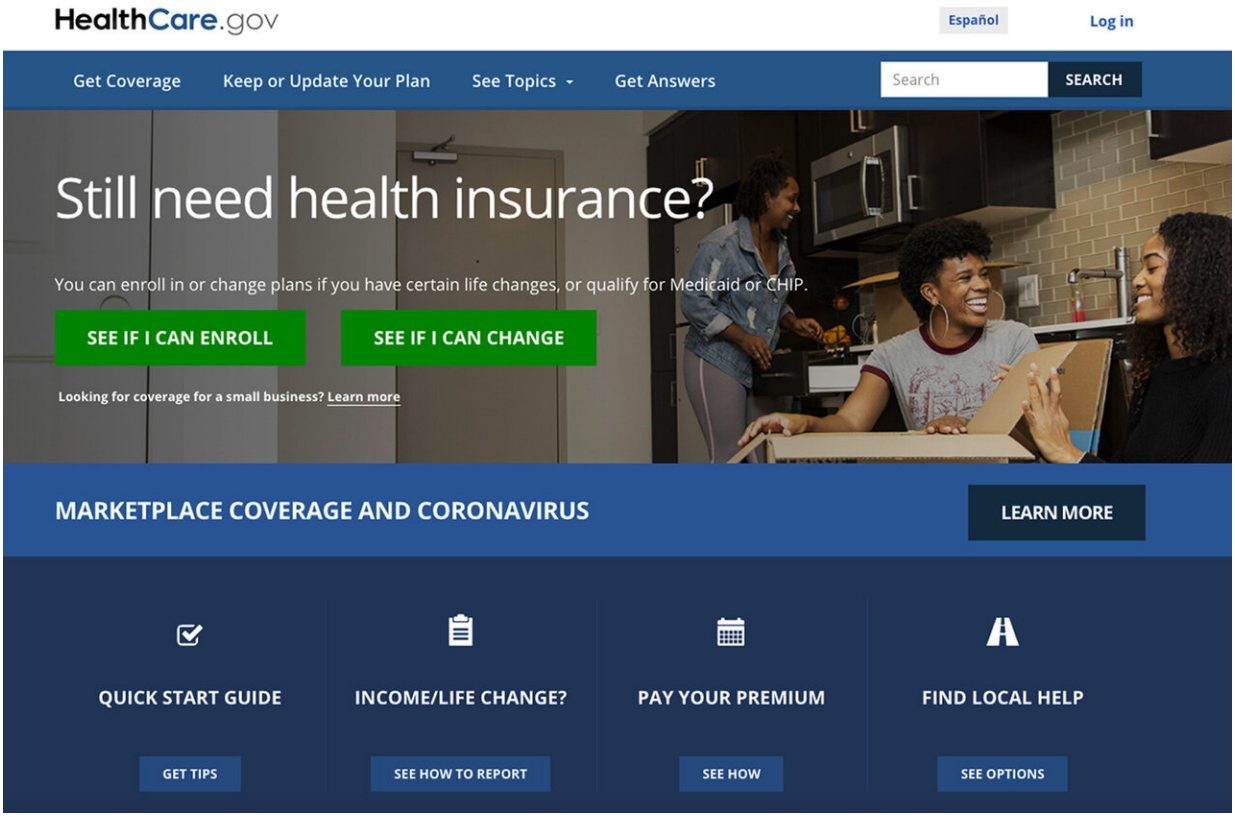
Solid sign-ups for Biden's new 'Obamacare' coverage offer

March 3 2021, by Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar



This screen grab from the website shows the main web page for the HealthCare.gov. More than 200,000 people signed up for coverage in the first two weeks after President Joe Biden re-opened HealthCare.gov as part of his coronavirus response, the government said Wednesday. (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services via AP, File)

More than 200,000 people signed up for coverage in the first two weeks after President Joe Biden reopened HealthCare.gov as part of his coronavirus response, the government said Wednesday.

The solid start to the three-month special enrollment period indicates a pent-up demand for health insurance as the COVID-19 pandemic approaches the one-year mark and many people remain unemployed or unable to work as many hours as they did before the outbreak.

HealthCare.gov offers subsidized private health insurance under the Obama-era Affordable Care Act, catering mainly to low- and moderate-income working people.

If Congress passes Biden's coronavirus response bill, taxpayer-funded financial aid will become considerably more generous, and a greater number of solid middle-class households would also qualify for assistance. Though the sweetened subsidies last only through the end of next year, their availability is expected to boost insurance coverage. The Democratic COVID-19 legislation also has incentives for states to expand Medicaid to cover more low-income adults.

It fits into Biden's strategy of pushing the U.S. toward coverage for all by building on the health law better known as "Obamacare." The Congressional Budget Office estimates that about 33 million people remain uninsured, though former President Barack Obama's health law has been on the books for more than 10 years.

The numbers released Wednesday by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services show that more than 206,000 people signed up for coverage from Feb. 15-28. The figures are partial, since they cover only the 36 states served by the federal HealthCare.gov insurance market. National enrollment will be higher when totals from states running their own insurance websites are factored in later.

HealthCare.gov will be accepting applications through May 15, a period about twice as long as the regular annual open enrollment. The government has a $50 million advertising budget, five times what the Trump administration would spend on annual open enrollment.

Former President Donald Trump tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully to repeal "Obamacare" and refused to reopen enrollment because of the pandemic. Biden's special sign-up period features a special emphasis on reaching Black and Latino communities that have borne a heavy burden from COVID-19.

"Obamacare" now covers more than 20 million people through a combination of subsidized private plans and, in most states, expanded Medicaid.

Experts agree that job losses during the pandemic have led to more uninsured people, but it's unclear how many more. Some estimates range from 5 million to 10 million, while the Congressional Budget Office suggests a lower number, more like 3 million.

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