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Details of 'wellness plan' still to be worked out as Gov. Inslee, employee

Health website opens with glitches

Published: October 2, 2013

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Computer glitches crippled Washington's health insurance exchange just as it went online Tuesday morning to take enrollments on its debut day.

But Gov. Jay Inslee and spokesmen for the Washington Health Benefit Exchange said the setbacks won't hold back the health reform.

"There is nothing that I can foresee that would slow down the state of Washington from progress" on health reform, Inslee told reporters during a midday news conference in Seattle.

Inslee, a Democrat who voted for the Affordable Care Act as a member of the U.S. House in 2010, pledged "a six-month all hands on deck" effort to enroll many of the state's 1 million uninsured in either new private insurance plans or Medicaid.

But the breakdown in the new online exchange kept the public from using the online enrollments at wahealthplanfinder.org until about 1:30 p.m. Tuesday. By pulling the system offline, technicians were able to work on it without the complication of having consumers trying to use the site to enroll, Washington Health Benefit Exchange spokesman Michael Marchand said.

Until the online system went back online, a call center in Spokane handled toll-free inquiries and was able to help some consumers sign up. Marchand told reporters the center was handling about 1,000 calls an hour, but he did not know how many enrollments had been completed.

The reason for the technical glitch at wahealthplanfinder.org was not immediately clear. Spokesmen for the exchange said they hoped to have more answers by Wednesday morning.

"This morning, we determined that consumers attempting to enroll in health coverage through Washington Healthplanfinder experienced slow loading times or difficulty completing their application," exchange CEO Richard Onizuka said in a prepared statement. "While this is not affecting all users, the site was placed into maintenance mode in order to identify and correct these issues."

Elsewhere around the state, groups reported mixed success in getting people signed up. Choice Regional Network, an Olympia-based agency that is coordinating efforts in Thurston County and six other counties to let consumers know they have new options for health care coverage, reported that some clients were enrolled using paper forms.

"We're making history today," said Winfried Danke, Choice's executive director. "This is unprecedented. There will be coverage available for tens of thousand of people in our communities who have not had access. It's important not to lose sight of that."

In Pierce County, where the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department is coordinating the outreach efforts by health clinics and community groups, the lack of an online portal for most of the day put a damper on sign-ups.

"People are so excited about this. They want it yesterday," spokeswoman Kayla Scrivner said.

Scrivner said it was clear from colleagues around Pierce County that “people were excited to get signed up” and that many partner groups were getting a lot of phone calls. Her agency rescheduled many appointments for consumers who had wanted to enroll in person, and staffers reminded callers that they have plenty of time to get enrolled before the subsidized health coverage begins Jan. 1.

Exchanges in other states also suffered delays or technical problems.

The Los Angeles Times reported 30-minute wait times at California’s exchange call center and consumer difficulties logging onto the exchange website. Other problems were reported in Oregon, Maryland and Minnesota.

Washington Healthplanfinder said its site was operational after 1:30 p.m., but Jeffers and others reported challenges getting it to work well after that point.

Danke and Libby Weisdepp, a program manager with Choice, said their organization and partners expect to focus on outreach over the next 30 days.

Weisdepp said one community health clinic in Lewis County had set up 100 appointments over the next week to help individuals sign up for care.

“What we can tell is this program is on track, and there is enthusiasm in the community. People want to enroll and our community partners are doing their best to make that happen,” Danke said.

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