

Another month of fixes for US health care website

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In this Aug. 1, 2012 file photo, Jeffrey Zients testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington. President Barack Obama is calling Zients to help correct problems with the new federal health care website. The White House says Zients will assist a team that is said to be working around the clock on the site, www.healthcare.gov. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite, File)

The Obama administration has set a rough timetable of the end of November for completing a long list of fixes to the new, trouble-plagued government website for uninsured Americans to get health insurance coverage, the linchpin of the president's signature legislative achievement.

Summarizing a week's worth of intensive diagnostics, the administration acknowledged Friday the HealthCare.gov website has dozens of complex problems and tapped a private company to oversee fixes.

Jeffrey Zients, a management consultant brought in by the White House to assess the extent of problems, told reporters his review found dozens of issues across the entire system. The site is made up of layers of components that are meant to interact in real time with consumers, [government](#) agencies and [insurance](#) company computers.

It will take a lot of work, but "HealthCare.gov is fixable," Zients declared.

The vast majority of the issues will be resolved by the end of November, he asserted, and there will be many fewer screen freezes. He stopped short of saying problems will completely vanish.

The troubles have been nightmarish for the White House, which had promoted enrollment to be as simple as making a purchase on Amazon.com. This week, President Barack Obama declared himself frustrated by the setbacks while still trumpeting the benefits of the [health care](#) law and encouraging consumers to apply by phone if the website proved a hindrance.

In his weekly radio and internet address Saturday, Obama vowed that "in the coming weeks, we are going to get it working as smoothly as it's supposed to."

"We're only a few weeks into a six-month open enrollment period, and everyone who wants insurance through the marketplace will get it," he said.

HealthCare.gov was supposed to be the online portal for uninsured Americans in several dozen [states](#) to get coverage under Obama's health care law, but it became a huge bottleneck immediately upon launch Oct. 1 and a major embarrassment for Obama. Some states have set up their own online exchange which appear to be working better.

The marketplaces are the gateway to obtaining health insurance under the new health care law, which requires most Americans to have coverage by Jan. 1. Middle-class people who don't have insurance on the job can purchase a private plan with new tax credits to make the premiums more affordable. Low-income people will be steered to an expanded version of Medicaid—the government-funded program that provides health care coverage for the poor— in states that agree to extend the safety net program

The U.S. has been the only major developed country without a national health care system, and the overhaul was supposed to change that. The system is not the centralized, government-run setup seen in places like Britain and instead uses various ways to require or encourage Americans to get private or, for the poor or elderly, government-provided insurance.

What's known as Obamacare is the closest the U.S. has ever come to universal health care after a century of efforts, and it has been under heavy attack by opposition Republicans from the start.

Now, with congressional elections coming next year, Republicans are using the administration's handling of the troubled website launch to regain momentum after their effort to defund Obamacare led to a 16-day partial [government shutdown](#).

As part of its effort to repair the system, the administration said it is promoting one of the website contractors, a subsidiary of the nation's largest [health insurance](#) company, to take on the role of "general contractor" shepherding the fixes.

Quality Software Services Inc.—owned by a unit of UnitedHealth Group— was responsible for two components of the government's online insurance system. One is the data hub, a linchpin that works relatively well, and the other is an accounts registration feature that initially froze and caused many problems.

The briefing from Zients came a day after executives of QSSI and the other major contractor, CGI Federal, told Congress that the government didn't fully test the system and ordered up last-minute changes that contributed to logjams. Next week, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius is scheduled to testify.

Visiting a community health center on Friday in Austin, Texas, Sebelius said that "in an ideal world there would have been a lot more testing" but added that her department had little flexibility to postpone the launch against the backdrop of Washington's unforgiving politics.

In the Republican address, Rep. Fred Upton of Michigan, the chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, asked whether the problems evident now foreshadowed future troubles with the [health care law](#).

"In a few short months, families across the country will be subject to penalties under the law's individual mandate," he said. "How can the administration punish innocent Americans by forcing them to buy a product many cannot afford, from a system that does not work?"

Administration officials are still refusing to release any numbers on how

many people have successfully enrolled for insurance. Although 700,000 have applied for coverage through the new online markets, it's believed only a fraction of that number actually managed to sign up. Before the [website](#) went live, an [administration](#) estimate projected nearly 500,000 people would sign up in October alone.

The federal government is running the insurance markets or taking the lead in 36 states. The rest were set up by states themselves.

Consumers have until Dec. 15 to sign up for coverage to take effect Jan. 1. Under the law, pre-existing medical conditions will no longer be a barrier for obtaining insurance. But the markets also need lots of young, healthy customers to keep premiums affordable. Open enrollment season extends until Mar. 31.

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