

Sebelius to face tough questioning on health law

October 27 2013



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)

Republicans said Sunday they intend to press Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius on the Obama administration's troubled launch of healthcare.gov, the online portal to buy health insurance, the linchpin of the president's signature legislative achievement.

Meanwhile, the healthcare.gov application and enrollment system was down Sunday afternoon because the company that hosts the site had an Internet outage. HHS spokeswoman Joanne Peters wrote on Twitter that Terremark, the hosting company, was "working to fix ASAP," or "as soon as possible."

The Obama administration will face intense pressure next week to be more forthcoming about how many people have actually succeeded in enrolling for coverage in the new insurance markets. Medicare chief Marilyn Tavenner is to testify during a House hearing on Tuesday, followed Wednesday by Sebelius before the House Energy and Commerce Committee. The officials will also be grilled on how such crippling technical problems could have gone undetected prior to the website's Oct. 1 launch.

"The incompetence in building this website is staggering," said Rep. Marsha Blackburn, the second ranking Republican on the panel and an opponent of the law.

Democrats said the new system needed time to get up and running, and it could be fixed to provide millions of people with affordable insurance. Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear, a Democrat, said the system was "working in Kentucky," a state that has dealt with "some of the worst health statistics in the country ... The only way we're going to get ourselves out of the ditch is some transformational tool," like the new health insurance system.

Some states such as Kentucky have set up their own online exchanges which appear to be working better than the federal website which covers three dozen states. Many Republican-led states refused to set up their own exchanges because their governors oppose the health care overhaul, claiming it will cost jobs and increase government spending.

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 become 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 troubled launch of the government website to regain momentum after their effort to defund Obamacare led to a 16-day partial government shutdown.

Blackburn said she wanted to know much has been spent on the website, how much more it will cost to fix the problems, when everything will be

ready and what people should expect to see on the site. Blackburn and Republican Rep. Mike Rogers also raised questions of whether the website could guard the privacy of applicants.

"The way the system is designed it is not secure," said Rogers, who is chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

The administration sought to reassure applicants about their personal information. HHS spokeswoman Joanne Peters said when consumers fill out their applications, "they can trust that the information they're providing is protected by stringent security standards and that the technology underlying the application process has been tested and is secure."

The botched rollout has led to calls on Capitol Hill for a delay of penalties for those remaining uninsured. The Obama administration has said it's willing to extend the grace period until Mar. 31, the end of open enrollment. That's an extra six weeks. The insurance industry says going beyond that risks undermining the new system by giving younger, healthier people a pass. Their premiums are needed to offset the increased cost of covering older people with pre-existing conditions who now cannot be turned down for insurance.

Several Democratic senators are among those calling for a delay to the penalty for noncompliance. Sen. Joe Manchin, who is seeking a yearlong delay to the penalty for noncompliance, said his approach would "still induce people to get involved, but it will also give us the time to transition in. And I think we need that transition period to work out the things."

The administration was under no legal requirement to launch the website Oct 1. Sebelius, who designated her department's Medicare agency to implement the health care law, had the discretion to set open enrollment

dates. Officials could have postponed open enrollment by a month, or they could have phased in access to the website.

But all through last summer and into early fall, the administration insisted it was ready to go live in all 50 states on Oct. 1.

An HHS memo prepared for Sebelius in September estimated that nearly 500,000 people would enroll for coverage in the marketplaces during October, their first month of operation. The actual number is likely to be only a fraction of that. The administration has said 700,000 people have completed applications.

On Friday, the Obama administration acknowledged 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 the website is "fixable" and the majority of issues will be resolved by the end of November.

Blackburn spoke on "Fox News Sunday," Beshear appeared on NBC's "Meet the Press," Rogers was on CNN's "State of the Union," Manchin was interviewed on ABC's "This Week," and Shaheen made her comments on CBS' "Face the Nation."

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Citation: Sebelius to face tough questioning on health law (2013, October 27) retrieved 13 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-10-sebelius-tough-health-law.html>

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