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# BUSINESS

## 'Huge push' ahead for health care sign-ups

By Lora Hines

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More than 256,000 Houston-area residents have selected plans or been re-enrolled in coverage through the health insurance marketplace mandated by the Affordable Care Act, and federal and local health officials and experts believe a last-minute surge could significantly increase the numbers before the 2015 open-enrollment period ends later this month.

There have been about 75,000 more local sign-ups than in 2014, during the inaugural year of the marketplace. About 1 million Houston-area residents remain uninsured.

During a conference call with reporters on Wednesday, Marjorie Petty, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services regional director overseeing Texas, released updated sign-up data showing nearly 969,500 residents statewide selected coverage or were automatically re-enrolled between Nov. 15 and Jan. 30.

The latest update was the first to include local figures. The Houston area recorded 256,982 plan selections and re-enrollments for the period, up from the estimated 180,000 residents who enrolled in coverage last year.

"These numbers would not be as strong as they are without local leadership," Petty said. "We are making progress across the country and in Texas."

The Dallas metropolitan area led the state, with 277,015 plan selections and re-enrollments, followed by the Houston area.

Nationwide, close to 7.5 million people selected or were re-enrolled in coverage using healthcare.gov. Petty said the numbers prove the health care law is working and people are getting the insurance they need.

The deadline for open enrollment is Feb. 15.

Although she said she does not have an enrollment goal for the state, Petty said she's confident Texas will "hit a great number." More than 85 percent of Texans who enrolled

in coverage were eligible for federal subsidies to reduce their monthly premiums. About 80 percent were able to buy coverage for less than \$100 per month, she said.

### **'Save money'**

"People are going to save money, and that's great," she said. "I know Texans are saving money."

When asked whether she had higher expectations for the Houston area, Petty said she believes many people might wait until the last minute to enroll in coverage and boost the numbers. Last year, about 440,000 Texans enrolled during the final month as local and federal officials made a concerted push.

Petty credited Houston-area leaders this year for extending enrollment hours during nights and weekends at community centers and using radio spots to encourage sign-ups.

"We've got a huge push going on the next 11 days," Petty said.

### **Answering questions**

Porfirio Villarreal of Houston's Health and Human Services Department on Wednesday was on his way to Houston's Univision station for a two-hour telethon to answer viewers' health insurance questions and assist them in enrolling. About 700 callers typically phone in to get help, he said. The telethons are among hundreds of outreach events that area health care advocates have conducted to educate and enroll people, he said.

### **'A lot of education'**

"Basically, we're just explaining what the (marketplace) is," Villarreal said. "We do a lot of education."

Despite Petty's optimism, millions of Texans and thousands of Houstonians will remain uninsured because state leaders have not come up with a way to expand Medicaid to cover them. Since California expanded the program to cover more of its residents, Texas has overtaken it as having both the highest rate and highest number of uninsured residents.

Elena Marks, president and CEO of Houston's Episcopal Health Foundation, said Wednesday's updated numbers are encouraging - until one considers that about 6 million Texans are uninsured.

"If you look at the glass as half full, more adults are becoming insured at a faster rate and in a shorter period of time," she said. "We ought to be proud we've made this much progress."

### **1.25 million?**

Ken Janda, president and CEO of Community Health Choice, one of the Houston area's largest managed care providers and a marketplace insurer, said he thinks the state remains on track to enroll 1.25 million, with Houston accounting for roughly a quarter, or 312,000, of that total. He thinks premium subsidies and the threat of penalties for those who remain uninsured are pushing people to get coverage.

"The Affordable Care Act is doing what it was supposed to do," he said. "For \$25 to \$50 a month, people can get a good insurance policy."

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