

The Health Insurance Exchange: How's It Going?

Because of the interrelated, dramatic events that occurred on October 1, the opening day of the Health Insurance Exchange (HIX), we decided in this article in our series on the Affordable Care Act (ACA) to provide both a recap of what happened and why and an update on how the HIX is working now. In our next article, we plan to look at new revenue opportunities for hospitals under the ACA, the topic originally scheduled for today.

As news agencies reported across the country, opening day at health insurance exchanges brought a succession of site crashes when many more Americans than anticipated visited a state exchange or the federal government's exchange, HealthCare.gov, looking for information on coverage. The federal government is operating the health insurance exchanges of 36 states that were not ready to open on October 1.

The number of visitors and callers to HIX sites was impressive and encouraging for ACA's mission of helping the uninsured gain coverage. *USA Today* quoted Erin Shields Britt, spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Services, who reported 4.7 million visits to HealthCare.gov in its first 24 hours of operation; 190,000 calls to the federal call center; and 104,000 requests for online chats.

Our state's call center received 2,000 calls by 10 a.m., on October 1, according to the *Puget Sound Business Journal*. And the state's health exchange, Healthplanfinder, had to close within an hour of opening. Users experienced delays reaching the site, using the site, and completing the application process.

The other dramatic event on October 1 was the shutdown of the federal government, occasioned by the failure of Congress to agree on a funding bill to keep the government open. The shutdown occurred when the U.S. Senate rejected the funding bill passed by the House of Representatives because the House bill included a provision to delay the implementation and enforcement of ACA's individual mandate by one year.

The individual mandate is the provision of the ACA that requires non-exempt uninsured Americans to obtain health care insurance by 2014 or pay a fine. Delaying that mandate means delaying implementation of the ACA. As a result, some House members called the House funding bill an attempt to "unfund" Obamacare, the name often applied to the ACA.

And because the HIX is the means to provide Americans with access to affordable health care coverage, it, too, is critical to the successful implementation of ACA. Millions of uninsured Americans need to sign up for health insurance to keep the HIX rates low and affordable for the uninsured. Coverage for those Americans also underpins implementation of subsequent provisions of the ACA.

Good news on the HIX came from the states by the second week of October. By then most state health insurance exchange sites were operating smoothly, including our state's site. *USA Today* reported on October 8 that Washington state officials believe 130,000 uninsured residents will sign up in time to be covered by January 1. The online news source said the Director of Communications for Washington's Healthplanfinder, Michael Marchand, reported 800,000 hits and 160,000 unique visitors to the site in its first week of business. *USA Today* quoted Marchand as saying, "I've heard, 'It sounded too good to be true.' But when I went online, I found out it was true," Marchand said. "It's going to change their lives."

Then, on October 17, federal employees returned to work after the House and Senate agreed on a funding bill, which did not include any provisions affecting implementation of the ACA.

Unfortunately, however, HealthCare.gov has continued to have significant problems, leading to concern that the performance of the federal HIX, operating those 36 state sites, may undermine the ability of millions of Americans to enroll in health care coverage and, as a result, undermine the success of the ACA.

IT experts allege that the design of HealthCare.gov is the problem. Tom Costello reported for *NBC Nightly News* that the site was designed to handle between 50,000 and 60,000 simultaneous users while some 250,000 simultaneous users have been trying to gain access. Another feature of the federal site requires users to register first before comparing options, which is likely, the experts say, to have caused and may continue to cause significant delays in the site's operation.

Insurers, too, are now experiencing problems with HealthCare.gov. The *Washington Post* reported on October 12 that the system is sending faulty and sometimes duplicate reports to insurers on who has signed up for coverage. The site was supposed to give insurers a daily list of people who have enrolled. But insurers quoted by the *Post* say that they have no idea who their customers are supposed to be.

President Obama addressed the issues with HealthCare.gov in a speech from the White House on October 21, saying "it's going to get fixed," CNN reported.

We'll keep you posted on the status of HealthCare.gov and its effect on the implementation of the ACA.