

## Obamacare enrollments hit nearly 6.4 million

*By Lora Hines*

December 23, 2014 Updated: December 23, 2014 10:10pm

A last-minute push that focused on ensuring that consumers have coverage in place at the start of year boosted enrollments in the federal health insurance marketplace through Dec. 19, with about 6.4 million nationwide signing for the first time, re-enrolling or being automatically re-enrolled.

Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia Burwell released the government's most recent enrollment figures for the federal website, healthcare.gov, during a news conference Tuesday. Sign-ups from states such as New York and California, which operate their own marketplaces, were not included.

Burwell said about 1.9 million new consumers bought federally mandated coverage and 4.5 million people who had 2014 coverage were re-enrolled between Nov. 15 and Dec. 19. Of those who re-enrolled, more than 30 percent did so on their own. The rest were automatically re-enrolled.

"We still have a way to go, but we are headed in the right direction," she said. "Our priority is to get as many people as we can insured."

Her department expects as many as 9.9 million people to enroll in health care coverage by the end of 2015.

Burwell didn't release state-specific enrollment information.

Last year, nearly 734,000 Texans, many of whom had never been insured, signed up for coverage. Still, about 6 million Texans, or 25 percent of the state's population, remain uninsured. The state has the nation's highest rate of uninsured residents. Experts estimate more than 1 million in the Houston area are uninsured.

Burwell repeatedly said open enrollment would continue through Feb. 15. That comes as the Supreme Court said this week it will hear arguments on March in a case challenging the law's subsidies. The case, *King vs. Burwell*, questions the legality of federal insurance premium subsidies offered in the 34 states that opted not to establish their own marketplaces, including Texas.

"Nothing has changed in our open enrollment in terms of subsidies and assistance people can get. We believe our position is the one that is correct," Burwell said.

She wouldn't say whether there's a contingency plan in case the subsidies are struck down.

"We are focused on what is the law of the land right now," Burwell said, referring to open enrollment and Medicaid expansion.

Federal officials and health insurance advocates have said an estimated 85 percent of consumers who enrolled in 2014 marketplace coverage received subsidies.

In Texas, 84 percent of enrollees qualified for assistance to reduce their health insurance premiums. The average monthly premium for Texans who bought 2014 coverage was \$72.

If subsidies are found illegal and Congress or states without their own marketplaces don't come up with remedies, millions could again become uninsured, area health care experts said.

"Loss of these subsidized plans would mean that the nearly 1 million Texans who have such plans would lose those plans," Elena Marks, president and CEO of Houston's Episcopal Health Foundation, said in an email. "Many would be unable to obtain coverage without those subsidies."

She said the drop in the rate of uninsured in Texas over the last year is due in part to the Affordable Care Act.

"As the state with the highest percentage and highest number of uninsured people, it would be really sad to take a step backward," she said.

Ken Janda, president and CEO of Community Health Choice, the Houston area's largest managed care organization, agreed with Marks' assessment. So far, his organization has enrolled more than 17,000 people in 2015 coverage. Most of them are low-income people, he said.

"Many of them will go back to being uninsured," Janda said. "Our local Texas leaders should fix the problem."

To read the full article, click [here](#).