

## Texas' Affordable Care Act number goes higher

Latest statistics say over 7 million in U.S. have the federal insurance

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By Lora Hines

More than 7 million people, including 918,890 Texans, have selected plans or were automatically re-enrolled in coverage in the federal health insurance marketplace under the Affordable Care Act, according to government data released Wednesday.

Those figures might appear significant, since nearly 7 million nationwide, including almost 734,000 Texans, signed up for federally mandated coverage during last year's inaugural marketplace open enrollment period. There is still about a month to go before the 2015 open enrollment period ends Feb. 15. Like last year, experts say many people probably will wait until the last minute to sign up or renew coverage.

However, the figures released Wednesday aren't separated into new enrollments and renewals. The figures indicate more Texans have bought 2015 coverage than they did on 2014, but it's not known how many. It's not known how many previously were uninsured.

"You'd have to know that to assess the impact on the uninsured rate," said Elena Marks, president and CEO of Houston's Episcopal Health Foundation, in a recent email. She also is a nonresident fellow of health policy at Rice University's Baker Institute.

Texas has the largest percentage of uninsured residents nationwide. About 6 million Texans are uninsured.

Karen Love, senior vice president of Community Health Choice, the Houston area's largest managed care organization and a marketplace health insurance provider, said the latest numbers show new consumers bought coverage.

"We will easily top the 1 million mark," Love predicting, adding that most people who needed to keep coverage into 2015 probably renewed by Dec. 15. That was the deadline to ensure coverage on Jan. 1. "Anyone enrolled in January and February is bound to be new."

Federal health officials said Texas marketplace shoppers have an average of 31 health plans from which to choose. More than 85 percent of Texas consumers who selected health insurance plans between Nov. 15 and Dec. 15 were eligible for financial assistance to lower their monthly premiums. Many marketplace consumers might find coverage costing \$100 or less, officials said.

On Saturday, at least two free events have been planned to help Houston-area residents sign up for coverage. One will be 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the M.O. Campbell Educational Center at 1865 Aldine Bender. The second will be 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at downtown Houston's Discovery Green at 1500 McKinney.

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