Obama downplays health exchange debacle

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President Obama held a White House event Monday in an effort at damage control over the operation of the health care exchanges set up under the Affordable Care Act. Healthcare.gov, the main government site serving 36 states, has been plagued by technical difficulties since it opened for business three weeks ago. Obamacare, as it is commonly known, requires that nearly all individuals obtain health insurance beginning in January, or pay a penalty.

Obama spoke from the Rose Garden, flanked by consumers, small business owners and pharmacists, who, the White House claimed, "have either benefited from the health care law already or are helping consumers learn about what the law means for them and how they can get covered." Obama's remarks exuded arrogance and complacency, as he attempted to account for problems with the insurance exchange launch that can only be described as scandalous. He admitted that healthcare.gov "is not working the way it should for everybody—there's no sugarcoating it," but was short on specifics about what was causing the problems and what was being done to solve them.

While the administration claims there have been 20 million visits to the site, the White House has not said how many people have actually enrolled for coverage and will not release these figures until some time next month. On Sunday, a Health and Human Services (HHS) spokesman was still insisting that the "main driver of the problems is volume." In his remarks on Monday, however, the president was forced to concede that "the web site isn't working as well as it should, which means it's going to get fixed."

Consumers logging on to the site have been frustrated by hours-long waits and locked-up screens, stymied by a system that requires personal data to be verified before people can actually compare available plans and shop for coverage. The site often gives inaccurate information about the federal tax credits available to help defray costs. It sometimes tells low-income people that should be eligible for Medicaid that they are not qualified.

The *Washington Post* reported that people who are offered coverage through their jobs but want to compare prices on the government insurance exchange are having problems applying for coverage at healthcare.gov. Private insurers are also reporting that they are receiving erroneous data about who has signed up, indicating that the same person has enrolled or cancelled multiple times.

On Monday, Obama said, "We've got people working overtime, 24/7, to boost capacity and address the problems." While promising that "some of the best IT talent in the entire country" is joining the administration in a "tech surge" to fix the problems, he did not reveal how many people were being enlisted, what they would be doing, and how long it would take to fix the technical issues. According to a Department of Health and Human Services spokesman, the team has been taking the site offline for overnight tests.

Obama attempted to defend his health law, saying, "The essence of the law—the health care insurance that is available to people—is working just fine." He declared that Obamacare "is not just a web site." In the run-up to site launch, however, the White House touted the online insurance exchanges as the marketplace for "one-stop shopping," where people could compare plans and shop for coverage with ease.

After presenting the personal stories of a few people who had actually been able to log onto the site and enroll, Obama asserted, "The prices are good. It is a good deal. People don't just want it, they're showing up to buy it."

But he offered no information on what these plans actually cost, what they cover, and what out-of-pocket costs consumers could expect. One of the reasons the site was designed to require people to register first to

find out the subsidies to which they are entitled was to avoid the "sticker shock" of seeing the price of coverage without these subsidies.

In an attempt to work around this problem, a blog posted Monday on healthcare.gov announced that people "can now preview plans and prices available in your area without filling out the online application." After multiple clicks, you can now find out what plans cost without the subsidies.

Another link to an "improved calculator" to find out whether you qualify for tax credits takes you to a calculator set up by the Kaiser Family Foundation. The site also prominently displays a phone number for people to call in lieu of signing up online.

These are attempts to reduce traffic to the troubled sign-up and registration process, but in no way address the fundamental problems. Specialists working on the project have reported that the online system requires extensive repairs that will likely not be completed until after the December 15 deadline for people to sign up for coverage starting in January.

The biggest fear of the Obama administration is that the technical problems will deter people from signing up for coverage. The White House is particularly concerned that young, healthy people will not sign up in adequate numbers to offset the higher costs to cover older people and those with more serious medical problems. A failure to enroll younger people will cause private insurers on the exchanges to boost premiums even higher.

In numerous ways on Monday, Obama peddled the virtues of the health care overhaul: "The product is really good, people can save money," "It offers high-quality, affordable insurance," "Prices are low, people can save money."

Again, he was short on specifics—and for good reason. In the lead-up to the exchange launch, the White House released information that made clear the cheaper plans available would not only carry higher premiums, but would limit choices in coverage and carry substantial out-of-pocket costs. (See " US health exchanges will impose high out-of-pocket costs, limit choices ").

An incident at Monday's public relations event epitomized the false nature of Obama's contention that the health care overhaul is about providing improved care for ordinary Americans. As usual, Americans "from all walks of life" who would allegedly benefit

from Obamacare served as props behind the president as he made his remarks under the morning sun in the Rose Garden.

At one point, a young woman behind him appeared to begin to faint and was assisted by others off the stairs. Obama cynically quipped, "That's what happens when I talk too long," and called out to the individual who had caught the woman, "Good catch."