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‘Obamacare’ sign-ups surge to 20 million, days before open enrollment closes

BY AMANDA SEITZ, ASSOCIATED PRESS - 01/10/24 3:01 PM ET

WASHINGTON (AP) — Some 20 million people have signed up for health insurance this year through the Affordable Care Act marketplaces, a record-breaking figure.

President Joe Biden will likely proclaim those results regularly on the campaign trail for months to come as former President Donald Trump, the Republican front-runner, vows to dismantle the Obama-era program.

The Biden administration announced Wednesday morning that 20 million have enrolled for coverage on the marketplace, days before the open enrollment period is set to close on Jan. 16.

The latest enrollment projections mean a quarter more Americans have signed up for coverage this year compared to last — another record-breaking year when 16.3 million enrolled in the program. Signs-ups spiked after Biden took office, with Democrats rolling out a series of tax breaks that give millions of Americans access to low cost plans, some with zero-dollar premiums.

“We must build upon this progress and make these lower health care premiums permanent,” Biden said in a statement. “But extreme Republicans have blocked these efforts at every turn.”

The nation’s top health official on Wednesday credited piqued interest in the coverage with an aggressive campaign to get people enrolled. The administration has worked with nonprofits across the the country, including in predominately Black and Latino communities, like South Florida, to get new people into coverage. The administration has also invested millions more dollars into hiring navigators who help people enroll, a

program that was decimated while President Donald Trump, a longtime critic of so-called “Obamacare,” was in office.

“The previous administration made no effort to let people know what they could get,” Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra said during an interview with MSNBC’s “Morning Joe.” “We’re out there, we’re not waiting for them to come to us. We’re going to them.”

But the increased enrollment news that the Biden administration celebrated on Wednesday has not come without cost. Some of the millions of new enrollees have only turned to the marketplace because they have been booted off Medicaid, the nearly free health care coverage offered to the poorest Americans or those with disabilities. The health plans they purchase through the marketplace will have higher premiums and copays for services.

Roughly 14.5 million Americans have been recently kicked off Medicaid after the federal government lifted a 3-year ban that barred states from removing ineligible people from the government-sponsored health insurance. States began purging millions of people from Medicaid last year, during an error-plagued process that has left thousands of children and pregnant women erroneously without health insurance coverage in some states.

Trump, meanwhile, is regularly threatening on the campaign trail to undo the Biden administration’s work on former President Barack Obama’s signature health care law.

“Obamacare is a catastrophe, nobody talks about it,” Trump said at a rally in Iowa on Saturday. The former president went on to criticize the late Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona for blocking GOP efforts to scuttle the law more than five years ago.

Although open enrollment for health insurance plans purchased through the Affordable Care Act ends on Jan. 16., people who have been removed from Medicaid may be eligible to enroll through the end of July.