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Randolph Hospital dismisses flap over navigator grant letter from Congress



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I [recently reported](#) that **Randolph Hospital** was one of four groups in the state and among more than 100 in the country that received grants to help educate the public about the health insurance exchanges set to open Oct. 1.

The hospital is using the \$350,000 grant to create a team of five navigators who will begin education efforts in Randolph, Moore and Montgomery counties in the coming weeks. The team will target those currently without health insurance and help them understand how to purchase coverage through the new exchange.

But as is the case with nearly anything and everything associated with the Affordable Care Act, this round of \$67 million in federal grants became coated in political rhetoric after the recipients received extra attention from a group of Republican members of Congress late last month.

What kicked it off was a letter from 15 members of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce to about half of the grant recipients, including Randolph Hospital, requesting more information about how they plan to use the money.

[The Aug. 29 letter](#), signed by the committee chairman and members including U.S. Rep. [Renee Elmers](#), an N.C. Republican from Dunn, sparked protests from a number of grant recipients as well as the Obama administration, which described the letter as a "blatant and shameful attempt to intimidate," according to Kaiser Health News.

The letter asked recipients to brief the committee on their proposal and provide extensive information about their plans. Some objected that the request would make it difficult for the navigator programs to get up an running before Oct. 1 and would have a chilling effect on hiring and training workers.

"Was this an attempt by members of the committee to basically stop and slow down the navigator process?" [Lisa Hamler-Fugitt](#), executive director of the **Ohio Association of Foodbanks**, a grant recipient, said to Kaiser Health News. "We're going to stop now and pull together voluminous documents to provide back to the committee?"

I reached out to Randolph Hospital and found that administrators with the Asheboro hospital didn't share the same opinion about the intent of the letter, or its impact.

"From my perspective, and the hospital's perspective, we just see this as they're doing their due diligence and making sure the organizations that are receiving these funds are going to be using the funds in the manner in which they were intended," said [Devin Griffith](#), vice president of care continuum and support services at Randolph. "We don't foresee it being a problem."

Griffith said the hospital has already briefed the committee staff during a 50-minute conference call and had no trouble pulling together the requested information, most of which he said was included in its original application.

The letter requested documentation explaining the work that will be performed and the organization that will perform it, as well as information about how the staff will be trained, the policies used to monitor staff and how the organization will use the information it gathers.

Additionally, recipients are to provide information about whether they have been contacted by health insurers or health care companies about the grant and documentation of all communications related to the grant.

Griffith noted that as a health care provider, Randolph Hospital already has many of the policies and procedures in place for screening job applicants — and also protecting confidential information — that other grant recipients might not be quite as familiar with.

As far as being prepared in time, Griffith anticipates having the full navigator team trained and in place by Sept. 23 to start the yearlong effort.

"We don't see this as a burden," Griffith said.

Owen Covington covers health care, insurance, law/bankruptcy court, media/advertising, local government and sports business.