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Despite Website Improvements, Millions of Blacks Not Covered

By Freddie Allen
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) - As the Obama administration makes strides to improve the functionality of HealthCare.gov, the flagship website for the Affordable Care Act, Republican lawmakers continue to block federal funds that would help millions of poor blacks get health insurance coverage.

A progress report on the improved performance of HealthCare.gov cited hundreds of software bugs that generate errors and hardware and infrastructure ill-equipped to handle any significant volume to site.

"For some weeks in the month of October, the site was down an estimated 60 percent of the time," stated the progress report.

Two months later, after insiders revealed that the site crashed on a test run with just a few hundred concurrent users, HHS officials said the site is more stable and can handle 50,000 users at a time.

Anton Gunn, director of External Affairs in the Office of Intergovernmental and External Affairs (IEA) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said that in the first two months, 1.2 million Americans selected marketplace health insurance plans or they received a determination that they were eligible for Medicaid or the children's health insurance program. Another 1.9 million people have completed the application process through healthcare.gov and are still in the process of shopping for a plan.

"The bottom line is that healthcare.gov, beginning December 1, is night and day from where it was on October 1," Gunn said.

Recently, HHS announced that ex-Microsoft executive Kurt DelBene would replace Jeff Zients as the leader of the HealthCare.gov project. According to a statement released by the Health Department, DelBene will oversee field operations for HealthCare.gov and provide advice on additional enrollment channels, marketing and communications.

Applicants who want to enroll in Marketplace coverage that begins on January 1 should have completed the application and selected a plan by December 23 and pay the premium by December 31 or the date chosen by the insurer. Open enrollment closes on March 31.

Despite the website upgrades that include a feature that allows visitors to window shop for health care plans without creating an account, one of the biggest threats to the success of the Affordable Care Act is Republican obstruction at the state level.

According to a recent report released by the Department of Health and Human Services, if all states expanded Medicaid coverage, 95 percent of blacks who don't have health insurance might qualify for Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), or tax credits that would decrease the burden of paying premiums out-of-pocket. Blacks account for 16 percent of Americans that fit into the eligible uninsured category and "more than 2.2 million African American adults live in states that are not expanding Medicaid," stated the report.

Blacks often go without health insurance coverage at higher rates than their white counterparts.

According to a report by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 25



First Lady Michelle Obama collects toys from military children during a Toys for Tots event at the Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling Distribution Center in Washington, D.C., Dec. 19. (Official White House Photo by Chuck

Mandela's statue, at 24 feet, towers above others

By George E. Curry
NNPA Editor-in-Chief
PRETORIA, South Africa (NNPA) - Nearly a month after his death, there is a bitter struggle to define - and, in many instances, re-define - the legacy of Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first democratically elected president.

"here is an attempt to do in his death what they could not do in life - take away his story," Jesse Jackson said in a speech at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg. "He did not go to jail as some out-of-control youth who needed to be matured. He went in as a freedom fighter and came out as a freedom fighter."

The effort to soften the image of Mandela as a freedom fighter began long before his death.

Speaking at an African National Congress (ANC) celebration a year before Mandela's death, South African President Jacob Zuma said, "Inside our country*, even those who were are who are still, fundamentally opposed to the ANC, and who fought tooth and nail to keep South Africa a racist pariah state, now claim Nelson Mandela as their own."

In trying to reclaim Mandela as their own, many whites are trying to sanitize his image, Jackson argues.

Part of that effort begins with attributing many of Mandela's outstanding qualities to his 27 years in prison. For example, television commentators in the U.S. and in Africa say Mandela learned to love his enemies in jail and cite his forgiveness of his former jailers as evidence to support that assertion.

However, Mandela's autobiography, "Long Walk to Freedom," traces that lesson back to his youth.

"On this first day of classes I was clad in my new boots. I had never worn boots before of any kind, and that first day, I walked like a newly shod horse. I made a terrible racket walking up the steps and almost slipped several times. As I clomped into the classroom, my boots crashing on that shiny wooden floor, I noticed two female students in the first row were watching my lame performance with great amusement. The prettier of the two leaned over to her friend and said loud enough for all to hear: "The country boy is not used to wearing shoes," at which her friend laughed. I was blind with fury and embarrassment.

"Her name was Mathona and she was a bit of a smart aleck. That day I vowed never to talk to her. But as my mortification wore off (and I became more adept at walking with boots) I also got to know her, and she was to become my greatest friend at Clarkebury," a Wesleyan missionary school Mandela began attending at the age of 16.

In his autobiography, Mandela gave another example of not humiliating his opponents.

"I learned my lesson one day from an unruly donkey," he recounted. "We had been taking turns climbing up and down its back and when my chance came I jumped on and the donkey bolted into a nearby thornbush. It bent its head, trying to unseat me, which it did, but not before the thorns had pricked and scratched my face, embarrassing me in front of my friends. Like

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A Better Deal for Kids in the Budget? Democrats and Republicans Say 'Yes'

By Ann Challet
Special to the NNPA from
New America Media

June Jimenez of Silver Spring, Md. was pregnant when she was laid off from her job at a public affairs firm last year. She tried unsuccessfully for months to find a job and worried about losing her home.

"My mortgage is \$1,500 a month and I only received \$320 a week in unemployment," she says.

Her health insurance policy at the time didn't provide her with maternity coverage, and when she tried to purchase an individual plan, she discovered that she couldn't because her pregnancy qualified as a pre-existing condition. She qualified for Medicaid, which covered the cost of her pregnancy, including an emergency C-section.

But she found herself facing the possibility of having to choose among making her mortgage payments, paying for utilities, and buying food.

What sustained her, she says, was that by her sixth month of pregnancy she was able to enroll in WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children). She used WIC to buy food for her and her daughter for the next nine months.

Today Jimenez is working again, and her daughter Karanda is now almost a year old. "Without a doubt, Medicaid and WIC saved us," she says. "Those programs] provided a crucial bridge for me."

At a congressional briefing recently, children's advocacy organization First Focus Campaign for Children, in conjunction with advocacy group MomsRising, presented the results of a nationwide poll that found bipartisan public support for protecting funding for children's programs in the federal budget.

The survey of 800 voters, commissioned by First Focus and conducted by polling firm American Viewpoint, found that strong majorities of both Democrats and Republicans opposed cuts to programs like the ones that sustained Jimenez.

Voters were surveyed by landline and cell phone in the first week of December.

"Kids were affected significantly by the budget sequestration that took effect earlier this year," says Ed Walz, vice president of communications at First Focus. Cutbacks, he says, have disproportionately impacted programs serving children.

While some federal programs such as Social Security are mandatory, children's programs like WIC, Head Start (which provides early childhood services to low-income families, including education and child care), and K-12 education are funded through the appropriations process.

Head Start programs, for example, had to cut services for close to 60,000 children in the 2013-2014 school year.

According to the survey, three in four voters oppose cuts to K-12 education funding, including 87 percent of Democrats, 63 percent of Republicans, and 71 percent of independent voters.

Voters specifically oppose cuts to early learning for young children by a ratio of nearly two-to-one (62 to 32 percent), including half of Republicans, more than three in four Democrats, and almost 60 percent of independents. Nearly two in three voters oppose cuts to Head Start.

Sheila Arias of Durham, N.C. says that when she lost her job as an interpreter, she couldn't afford to keep her daughter, Jaslene, who was two at the time, in daycare. Arias went to the local Children's Developmental Services Agency for help, and was told that Jaslene would probably qualify for Early Head Start.

The agency helped Arias apply, and three weeks later, her daughter was accepted into the program. Jaslene has developmental disabilities, and Arias says that the teachers "offered her important structure and a regular daily routine" that, in addition to therapy, have helped with managing her special needs.

Jaslene will start kindergarten next year, and Arias says that Early Head Start is now helping her with her younger child, who is showing signs of a disorder that also affects his sister.

Democrats and Republicans recently focused a budget deal that would restore some of the funding to programs that were affected by sequestration. First Focus reports that if sequestration relief were to be applied proportionally to children's programs, about \$3.6 billion federal dollars would be restored to these initiatives in 2014, including \$1.8 billion for K-12 education and \$370 million for Head Start.

The poll found that when voters are asked to prioritize deficit reduction or protecting investments in children, 31 percent of respondents place a higher priority on investments in children and 41 percent rate the two options as equally important. "Voters reject what they consider a false choice," says Walz. "What this shows is that 72 percent of voters reject that the way to reduce the budget deficit is to cut children's programs."

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