

Thousands flock to Conn.'s exchange website

By SUSAN HAIGH, Associated Press

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HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — The first day of open enrollment for the state's new health insurance exchange was cheered as a success by Connecticut officials, with tens of thousands of people visiting the exchange's website or calling the toll-free number seeking information, and 167 actually signing up for health plans.

At an enrollment fair held at the Community Health Center of New Britain, there was a steady stream of applicants who had either scheduled appointments for enrollment assistance, or walked in off the street hoping to sign up for coverage. The health center serves about 26,000 uninsured residents.

Despite some computer glitch issues and delays, 48-year-old Elly Banos said she was still pleased to be one step closer to enrolling in health insurance. The New Britain woman, who spent the entire afternoon at the health center going through her options, has been without coverage for year-and-a-half due to a layoff. She said she's been holding her breath and "thanking God every day that I don't get sick or get into a car accident."

When she heard about the open enrollment, Banos said she decided to sign up on the first day.

"I don't want to wait for the last minute," said Banos, who was excited to learn she could get good individual coverage for \$70 to \$200 a month, or possibly qualify for the expanded Medicaid coverage.

Adrienne Lombardo, 63, of New Britain, has been without insurance coverage for two years and was excited about the prospect of possibly getting Medicaid coverage.

"Now I can get something done for my knee instead of worrying that my knee is getting worse," she said.

Of the 167 health plan enrollees, 83 were for subsidized purchases of commercial insurance products and 84 for Medicaid. Officials at Access Health CT, the health insurance exchange, expect to enroll about 100,000 between now and March 31, 2014.

Access Health's CEO Kevin Counihan acknowledged being surprised by the number of people who actually enrolled in plans on Tuesday. He said he had expected only one or two people to sign up for coverage, considering it won't begin until Jan. 1. People have until Dec. 15 to enroll for coverage beginning in 2014.

"I think it shows the demand for this," Counihan said.

As of 4 p.m., 28,200 people had visited Access Health CT's website and 1,930 people had called the toll free number, which was open until 8 p.m. The line will be open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. weekdays throughout the open enrollment process and from noon to 4 p.m. on Saturdays.

While there were some glitches with the Access Health CT website and the federal data hub, exchange officials said any wait times for the web page were relatively short. Gov. Dannel P. Malloy credited Connecticut with being better prepared than other states for the rush.

"Because we took the time and effort to be ready, to handle the calls, to have our ducks in a row if you will, we are in far better shape than those states and governors that have turned their back on this historic program and historic offering," the Democrat said at a ribbon-cutting ceremony held at the exchange's office and call center in downtown Hartford. He said it will be "a day to remember in Connecticut."

When there were issues with the website, workers at the New Britain health center tried to find other ways to help people enroll, such as using the toll-free line and filling out paper applications. Some applicants were briefed on their options and were scheduled for follow-up appointments. Others were matched up with insurance brokers.

Counihan had warned there would be some "bumps" in the complicated computer system on opening day, but promised they will be worked out. He also predicted the confusion and controversy surrounding the program in the midst of the federal government shutdown will eventually subside, especially as people see the value of the available tax subsidies.

Counihan said the exchange prepared for the possibility of the website being hacked and reported some attempts on Tuesday to federal authorities.