**ARTICLE A**

**“HealthCare.gov signups fall short of last year, at 9.2M”**

GOP sees dwindling interest in failed law, supporters claim sabotage

*The Washington Times* (3 Feb. 2017)

Tom Howell Jr.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/feb/3/healthcaregov-signups-fall-short-last-year-92m/>

The [Trump administration](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/trump-administration/) said Friday that 9.2 million people signed up for health coverage this year on the main Obamacare website, a drop-off of about 400,000 customers from last year’s effort.

Activity on HealthCare.gov had been running ahead of 2016 signups in the final weeks of President Obama’s tenure, despite rampant GOP talk of repeal, yet that enthusiasm appeared to wane ahead of the Jan. 31 deadline.

The update doesn’t include final data from a dozen state-run exchanges, although available figures show that at least 12 million people selected private coverage for the 2017 plan year under the Affordable Care Act, often with the help of taxpayer-funded subsidies.

Unless the remaining states report a robust finish, the law will fall short of Mr. Obama’s target of 13.8 million signups for this year.

“Signups are falling somewhat short of last year, which is movement in the wrong direction for improving the risk pool but hardly a collapse,” said Larry Levitt, a senior vice president at the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation.

Democrats insist the law can still be fixed, yet congressional Republicans seeking to repeal and replace the law with President Trump said the federal update showed dwindling interest in the law and that numbers would droop further, since customers must effectuate their coverage by paying their first month’s bill.

“Not only have today’s numbers failed to keep pace with last year’s, they also fail to account for those individuals who will actually follow through and pay the premiums,” Senate Finance Chairman Orrin Hatch, Utah Republican, said. “Whether families can and will pay the 25 percent average increase over last year for benchmark plans remains in question. Either way, enrollment numbers are down and costs are up. These cost hikes are exactly the reason why Republicans are committed to repealing and replacing Obamacare.”

Obamacare’s supporters, meanwhile, interpreted the figures as a testament to the law’s staying power, despite rampant talk of repeal and Mr. Trump’s decision to yank up to $5 million TV and radio advertising ahead of a crucial final week of signups.

Ben Wakana, a spokesman for the Health and Human Services Department under Mr. Obama, said “the [Trump administration](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/trump-administration/)’s efforts to suppress enrollment clearly had an impact.”

There were roughly 375,000 in the final two weeks of 2017 enrollment compared to roughly 700,000 in the last week of last year’s effort alone.

“When President Obama left office, enrollment was outpacing last year,” Mr. Wakana said. “Since taking office, the [new administration](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/trump-administration/) deliberately sabotaged the law: pulled down advertising, threatened outreach efforts, and sewed uncertainty about consumer protections. 12 million people are now covered, and Republicans must come up with a plan before ripping their health care away.”

Friday’s announcement from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services exhibited a clear shift in tone from the Obama era, when agency officials cheered the law at every turn.

Under Mr. Trump, the agency noted that customers faced an average premium hike of 25 percent among popular “benchmark plans” and a 28-percent drop in the number of participating insurers in 2017.