California readies $37 million Obamacare public relations effort

Four dozen groups receive grants for local education, outreach efforts

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Funded by $37 million in state grants, four dozen diverse groups from around California -- including labor unions, civil-rights advocates, medical clinics and the Los Angeles Unified School District -- are preparing launch education programs promoting Obamacare, the national health-care plan set to take effect in January.

The 48 recipients were selected from about 200 that applied for the grants, chosen for their access and ability to reach the estimated 5.3 million Californians in underserved communities who will be eligible for the subsidized or guaranteed health coverage.

"These organizations are well-established and well-known and trusted in their communities," said Larry Hicks, a spokesman for Covered California, the state agency established to oversee a marketplace of insurance carriers. "They'll take a more personal approach in explaining the programs and offerings through our health-insurance exchange."

Covered California has tentatively chosen 13 commercial health plans to offer guaranteed coverage under the federal Affordable Care Act, commonly known as Obamacare. With enrollment opening Oct. 1, the agency hopes to get the outreach efforts started in the next few weeks.

"We're taking a very targeted approach," Hicks said. "We looked at characteristics like ethnicity, language, region and age, then partnered with organizations to reach out to those demographics.

Of the $37 million total, groups serving metropolitan Los Angeles received almost $16 million. That includes the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, which was awarded $1 million for an campaign that will extend to San Bernardino and Orange counties, and the Actors Fund, which..."
Loma Linda University Medical Center was awarded $990,000, while the San Bernardino Employment and Training Agency got $750,000. Ventura County Public Health received $700,000 to reach out to local Latino residents.

With its grant of $250,000, the nonprofit Valley Community Clinic in North Hollywood will take its message to farmers markets and athletic fields -- places where working-class families often congregate -- as well as state employment offices and its own waiting rooms.

"People need to know they can get coverage for themselves and for their families," said Olga Duran, the clinic's director of patient services. "They can have ongoing coverage with preventative care -- not just acute care at an emergency room. We can get up close and personal to guide them through the process ... help get them an understanding of the world they're entering into and to facilitate that process.

Covered California is finalizing its contract with Los Angeles Unified, which has been tapped to receive $990,000 to connect with students and families in the nation's second-largest school district.

Dr. Kimberly Uyeda, LAUSD's director of Student Medical Services, said information will be presented to students in the adult-ed division, which offers English-language, high school equivalency and vocational-train classes.

In addition, younger students who belong to after-school clubs with a health or medical focus will be trained to convey information about the insurance-plan options to their families.

The grant money will help pay the salaries of district employees who are already working to coordinate health and social services for students. "We'll be pulling from well-trained and skilled staff members who can really do this outreach plan," Uyeda said.

Conservative bloggers have blasted LAUSD's plan to use students as "messengers" for President Obama's health-care reforms, but Uyeda insisted that any participation will be voluntary. "This is never going to be part of the curriculum or regular education," she said. "It would never be mandatory."
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