

Federal, regional officials stump at church to campaign for Obamacare

Congregation is urged to sign up for health care

BY GEOFF FOX
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TAMPA — With three weeks before the open enrollment deadline for residents to receive insurance under the Affordable Care Act, Sylvia Burwell, President Obama's top health official, attended a service at New Mount Zion Baptist Church on Sunday to encourage parishioners to sign up for coverage.

Burwell's pleas were echoed by Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn and U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor, who encouraged those in attendance to tell anyone who is uninsured about open enrollment. The deadline is Jan. 31.

The congregation greeted Burwell, the U.S. Secretary for Health and Human Services, with a standing ovation.

"We know the struggles many people have in terms of health care," said Burwell, who touted free wellness visits, cancer screenings and flu shots that Obamacare has helped previously uninsured Americans receive.

"The world is changing," she said. "This is open enrollment. For folks who don't have coverage, you can come in and get it. It offers peace of mind and quality care."

"We need to reach out



MARCIA MEJIA, KATHY CASTOR'S COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR
Sylvia Burwell, President Obama's top health official, speaks Sunday with Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn and U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor at New Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Tampa.

to all members of our community" and encourage them to enroll.

Since the Affordable Care Act — also known as Obamacare — was enacted, 17.6 million Americans "no longer live in fear that they can't get the health care they need," Burwell said.

More than 77,000 Hillsborough County residents are insured through the Affordable Care Act, according to November statistics from Enroll America, an independent nonprofit, nonpartisan group that works to get more people insured.

Still, roughly 15 percent of county residents did not have insurance.

Addressing the congregation, Castor characterized Obamacare as "remarkable."

"Millions and millions of Americans now have the opportunity to see a doctor," she said.

Buckhorn said Tampa officials are doing "everything we can to get everybody signed up."

After the service, Cece Mills of Tampa was among the first in line to get help choosing health coverage plans from navigators,

the name given to trained workers who guide and advise residents on insurance options.

Mills said she had previously tried to fill out an online application, but was unsuccessful.

"It was hard to get through; maybe there were too many people on the site at once," Mills said. "It was good to speak to someone face to face."

She left the church feeling more confident in negotiating the process.

Maria Davila, 24, of Tampa, said she was worried last year when doctors

found a "freckle" in her eye. She feared the freckle could be malignant.

"I didn't have insurance, then my nephew broke my glasses," Davila said. "I wasn't sure how I was going to pay for it. I was sticking my head in the sand."

Davila said she eventually heard about an open enrollment event at Hillsborough Community College.

She is now insured, but said she has had trouble accessing the Obamacare web site and still had questions.

Davila seemed heartened Sunday, especially after Burwell personally asked to hear her story.

"I just hope to get everything settled with coverage," Davila said.

Trellis Cooper of Tampa said she has not had health insurance for about a year.

"I went online, and things are clear, but I had so many questions," she said. "It's good to be able to talk to someone face to face" about insurance options.

After Sunday's service, Burwell, Buckhorn and Castor were swamped by parishioners seeking information on health insurance.

"This is important to individuals, their health and their finances," Burwell said.

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