Central Texas Navigator Omitted From Grant Funding Still Seeks To Help

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A Dallas-based community organization that had previously received the largest amount of grant funding of all navigators in Texas to help people seeking to enroll in coverage through the health insurance exchanges will get zero dollars for the upcoming open enrollment season, but still seeks to provide services to area residents. Daniel Bouton, who works with the Community Council of Dallas, says that while he's devastated that the group got no funding, it has applied to become a certified counselor, and is looking for other financing.

"We are patiently waiting on our CAC certification from CMS, in the meantime we are working on a diversified funding model to give us the opportunity to continue to provide enrollment services to our consumers," Bouton tells Inside Health Policy.

The organization expected to be given priority for the limited CMS funds since it had been successful and achieved its goals over the past five years, but that was not the case, Bouton says. Apparently, the agency didn't take into consideration that the council had received the largest amount of funding in Texas for last three years, including last year's $1.8 million grant.

The council is still trying to figure out a way to provide assistance to the population that it has served over the past five years. Shortly after realizing it would have no funding from CMS, the group applied to becomes a certified assister organization so that it could still offer assistance and education.

Bouton is especially concerned about the thousands of consumers with which the council has built relationships over the years.

They are going to show up at the door on Nov. 1, and we don't want to turn anyone away, Bouton says.

Bouton also stresses that the Texas entities that got the total $1.35 million in grant funding will serve only 45 of the massive state's 254 counties, leaving 211 counties without services. One organization, Change Happens, is focused on counties in the southern and southeastern parts of the state; the other, MHP Salud, will be working with residents in western Texas.

While there will be navigators in Houston and south to the coast as well as in several small counties in the El Paso areas, there are no entities based in central or north Texas at all, he said.

Texas GOP Sens. John Cornyn and Ted Cruz did not respond by press time to a query on the lack of navigators in their state.

CMS drastically slashed its funding for the navigator program, which Congress designed to provide non-biased in-person help with enrollment, since the Trump administration took control. CMS first cut the program by about 41 percent to $36 million in 2018 and said that future grants would based on performance. When 2018 enrollment did not fall as much as expected, the agency touted its efficient allocation of the funding and then slashed the the program even more for the 2019 plan year. In July, CMS said it would provide $10 million spread across navigators in 34 states that make up the federally facilitated exchange. Navigators are mandated to not only assist with in-person enrollment and other types of outreach but also to continue helping enrollees through the entire year as they deal with data-matching issues and other concerns. For 2019, the agency also said that navigators will be required to discuss all available products, including short-term plans. -- Amy Lotven (alotven@iwpnews.com)