

How Washington Got It Right When It Came to Obamacare

By Nina Shapiro
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“Here’s what Obamacare looks like when it works.” That was the headline of a recent Washington Post [piece](#), which referred to Washington state’s own [Health Plan Finder](#).

The online health insurance marketplace looks especially well run when compared with its federal counterpart, the many glitches of which were detailed in a front-page New York Times [story](#) on Sunday.

Sure, the Health Plan Finder had glitches too. See the embarrassing [hard stop](#) it came too almost as soon as it went live. But the [Health Benefit Exchange](#), the organization that runs the system, fixed the problems within days and is posting some of the highest numbers of enrollees in the country. As of yesterday, 62,000 have signed up for a plan (with payment already secured from 25,000 of those).

We reached out to benefit exchange Communications Director Michael Marchand this morning to find out how Washington got it right.

First of all, he says, Washington made the key decision to run its own health exchange, rather than to rely on the one being built by the federal government, as did more than 30 states. That allowed our state to bypass the logjam that such volume has created in the federal system.

Our legislature made that decision early, in 2011, so that the new exchange could get to work right away. And it made the exchange a public-private partnership rather than a government entity. Marchand points out that the exchange hired more than 100 people in some 15 months.

Bureaucracies simply don’t move that fast, he says.

A number of people hired by the exchange have technology backgrounds. That helped, Marchand says. He himself once worked at Microsoft, running communications for a group that built technology for health care systems. He says he also helped launch [Healthinsurance.com](#) and [Drugstore.com](#).

At the same time, the exchange also quickly [brought in Deloitte](#), a huge firm that creates systems like these. “That allowed us to start down the road of designing and building sooner than other states,” Marchand says.

Finally, Marchand says, the exchange “worked really, really hard” on making the consumer experience similar to that found on Amazon.com or Best Buy. Namely, people can browse the site without going through the cumbersome task of creating an account, which has held up the functioning of the federal system.

Given all this, why did the system crash on Oct. 1? “There is no way to forecast how a site will be used on the first day,” Marchand says. Consumers “bounced around” on the site in ways the techies hadn’t expected, causing unpredictable glitches.

“What we decided to do is pull the system into maintenance mode—to take it offline—and see what was wrong,” he says. It made the necessary changes to account for all the bouncing.

No doubt, Republicans here and in the other Washington will continue to rail against Obamacare, but at least in this state there’s a functioning system to love or hate.

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