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Sign-ups for 2020 Obamacare insurance on HealthCare.gov fall to 8.3 million: CMS



Inside C2

# Southern DAILY

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## In phone call with Trump, China’s Xi says U.S. interfering in internal affairs



FILE PHOTO: U.S. President Donald Trump meets with China’s President Xi Jinping at the start of their bilateral meeting at the G20 leaders summit in Osaka, Japan, June 29, 2019. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque/File Photo

WASHINGTON/BEIJING (Reuters) - U.S. President Donald Trump spoke on Friday with Chinese President Xi Jinping and claimed progress on issues from trade to North Korea and Hong Kong, but China said Xi accused the United States of interfering in its internal affairs.

The two leaders spoke a week after their envoys sealed a “Phase 1” agreement aimed at ending an 18-month trade war that has rattled markets and raised tensions.

Trump announced the phone call in a tweet. A White House official said they spoke on Friday morning. China Central Television said Xi spoke to Trump at the request of the U.S. president.

“Had a very good talk with President Xi of China concerning our giant Trade Deal. China has already started large scale purchase of agricultural product & more. Formal signing being arranged. Also talked about North Korea, where we are working with China, & Hong Kong (progress!)” Trump tweeted.

**RELATED COVERAGE**

China’s Xi, in call with Trump, says U.S. interfering in its affairs: Xinhua

China’s Xinhua news agency said Xi told Trump that China is deeply concerned about “the negative words and deeds” of the United States on issues related to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet.

“These actions have interfered in China’s internal affairs, harmed China’s interests and undermined mutual trust and

cooperation between the two sides,” Xinhua said.

The United States has called for the closure of mass detention camps in China’s western region of Xinjiang and expressed concern about the treatment of demonstrators in Hong Kong.

Xinhua said Xi hoped Trump would implement “the important consensus” reached during their meetings and phone calls and “pay close attention to and attach importance to China’s concerns, and prevent the interference of bilateral relations and the important agenda.”

China was angered when Trump last month signed legislation that authorizes sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials responsible for human rights abuses in Hong Kong, in what was seen as support for pro-democracy activists.

Of paramount concern to the United States is a threat by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un for what Pyongyang has called a “Christmas gift.”

U.S. officials have interpreted this to mean either a nuclear weapons test or a ballistic missile test. Trump and Kim have held three summits but failed to reach an agreement on lifting sanctions on North Korea in exchange for denuclearization by Pyongyang.

China and Russia on Monday proposed that the U.N. Security Council lift a ban on North Korea exports such as seafood and textiles, in a move the Russian U.N. envoy said was aimed at encouraging talks between Washington and Pyongyang.

The State Department, in response, said the U.N. Security Council should not be considering “premature sanctions relief” for North Korea as it is “threatening to conduct an escalated provocation, refusing to meet to discuss denuclearization.”

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng met U.S. special envoy for North Korea Stephen Biegun on Friday, China’s foreign ministry said, Biegun’s second high-level meeting in Beijing in two days amid growing tension on the Korean peninsula.

North Korea has conducted a series of weapons tests in recent weeks and some experts say the reclusive state may be preparing for an intercontinental ballistic missile test soon.

Such a test would mark a break from the detente reached with the United States last year, dash any hopes of resuming talks on ending North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs and put the two countries back on a path of confrontation.



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# Sign-ups for 2020 Obamacare insurance on HealthCare.gov fall to 8.3

(Reuters) - Enrollments for 2020 insurance plans, under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), on the HealthCare.gov website fell by about 200,000 from last year to 8.3 million, the U.S. government said on Friday, citing preliminary data.

FILE PHOTO: A man looks over the Affordable Care Act (commonly known as Obamacare) signup page on the HealthCare.gov website in New York in this October 2, 2013 photo illustration. REUTERS/Mike Segar

The data, as of Dec. 17, includes consumers who were granted an extension because they were unable to complete the enrollment process on Dec. 15, the initial deadline for open enrollment.

These numbers are preliminary and do not represent final 2020 Exchange Open Enrollment figures, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) said.

On Monday, the CMS extended the deadline for enrollment via the website by three days to Dec. 18 after people faced technical issues during the final hours of the enrollment deadline.

Over half a million consumers signed up on Sunday, the initial deadline for open enrollment, according to the CMS

Last year, 8.5 million people signed up for 2019 health plans, about 4% lower than the preceding year.

“Through the first six weeks of open enrollment, the comparable daily average number of plan selections was running 2.5% behind last year’s pace,” Evercore ISI analyst Michael Newshel said in a note earlier this week.

The CMS runs enrollment for insurance plans created by the ACA, often referred to as Obamacare, through the online marketplace HealthCare.gov for 38 states.



FILE PHOTO: A man looks over the Affordable Care Act (commonly known as Obamacare) signup page on the HealthCare.gov website in New York in this October 2, 2013 photo illustration. REUTERS/Mike Segar

Thirteen states, including District of Columbia, have separate state-based exchanges for enrollment with their own deadlines.

The Healthcare.gov platform accounts for 73% of national enrollment, while state-based exchanges represent 24%, according to Newshel.

“Similar to prior years, many of these states are seeing better growth than the federal platform,” Newshel said on Monday, citing reports from 8 of the 13

state-based exchanges.

The ACA, often considered the signature domestic achievement of former President Barack Obama, faced fierce opposition from the Trump administration that sought to overturn it in Congress and via courts.

In October, the government said monthly premiums for an average 2020 Obamacare health insurance

plan will fall by about 4% from this year.

CMS plans to release an updated snapshot during the second week of January with the final enrollment data.



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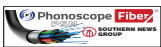
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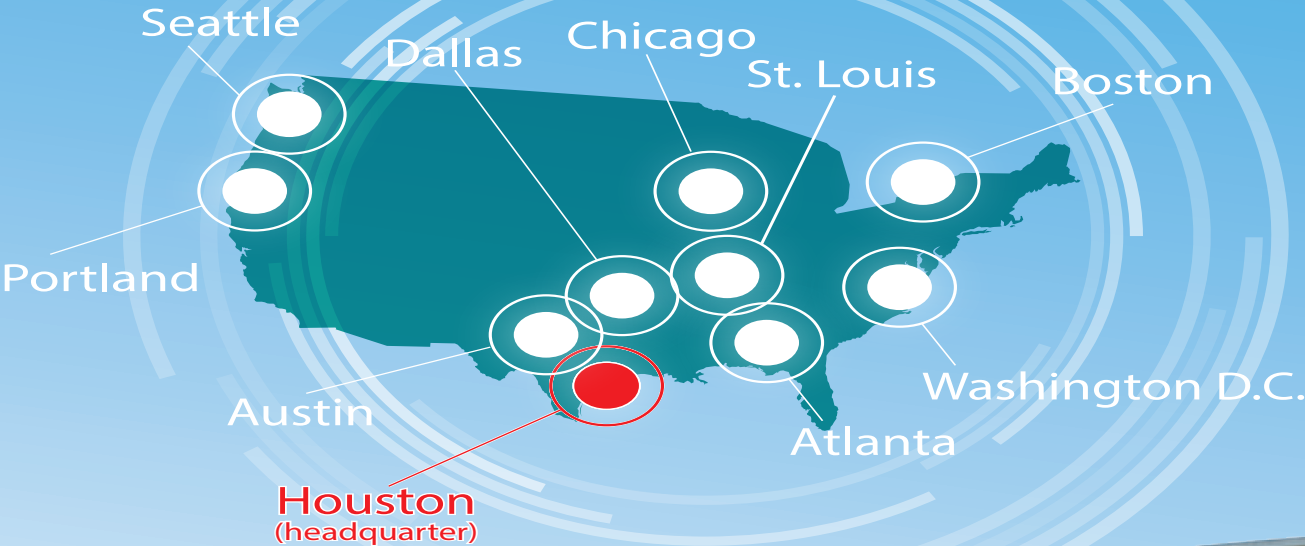
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**Editor's Choice**



A supporter wearing a Trump 2020 beanie attends U.S. President Donald Trump's campaign rally in Battle Creek, Michigan



U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi speaks to the media after voting on impeachment of U.S. President Trump



Supporters attend U.S. President Donald Trump's campaign rally in Battle Creek, Michigan



Supporters attend U.S. President Donald Trump's campaign rally in Battle Creek, Michigan



FILE PHOTO: U.S. President Trump arrives for closed Senate Republican policy lunch on Capitol Hill in Washington



Senate Democratic Leader Schumer watches Trump impeachment vote count at the U.S. Capitol in Washington.



U.S. President Donald Trump reacts while speaking during a campaign rally in Battle Creek, Michigan



U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during a campaign rally in Battle Creek, Michigan, U.S., December 18, 2019. REUTERS/Leah Millis?



The flu season is off and running in the Deep South. The most recent weekly flu report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finds high levels of flu-like illness in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Nevada, South Carolina and Texas. The highest level in that report for the week ended Nov. 16 was in Mississippi. Doctors in the Magnolia State say they're already seeing lots of patients. Dr. Darren Scoggin of Children's Medical Group in Jackson tells WLBT-TV that travel and family gatherings can help contribute to the flu's spread. CDC officials say it's not too late to get vaccinated. They say the flu vaccine is the best way to prevent flu and its complications. So far in the 2019-2020 flu season, CDC has reported four flu-associated deaths among children. (Courtesy WLBT-TV, <http://www.wlbt.com>)



**Related**  
**CDC Weekly U.S. Influenza Surveillance Report**

According to this week's FluView report, seasonal influenza activity in the United States continues to increase but the amount of activity and the predominant influenza virus varies by region.

**Viruses**  
Clinical Lab  
8.0% of respiratory specimens tested by clinical laboratories were positive for influenza viruses. This is higher than the previous week.  
Public Health Lab  
Nationally, B/Victoria viruses are most common followed by A(H1N1)pdm09 and A(H3N2) viruses. The predominant virus varies by region and age group.

**Illness**  
Outpatient Illness: ILINet

**The 2019-2020 Flu Season Is Off And Running In The Deep South. With The Worst Levels Reported In Mississippi**

## Flu Season Takes Off Quickly In Deep South States

**FLU**  
signs and symptoms

SORE THROAT DRY COUGH RHINITIS FEVER CHILLS HEADACHE

**Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor**

2.9% of visits to health care providers were for influenza-like illness (ILI). ILI has been at or above the national baseline of 2.4% for three weeks. Four of 10 regions were at or above their baselines. Outpatient Illness: ILI Activity Map

The number of jurisdictions experiencing high ILI activity remained at 8 this week. In addition, 7 jurisdictions had moderate activity compared to 0 last week.

**Geographic Spread**  
The number of jurisdictions reporting regional or widespread activity increased from 15 last week to 24 this week.

**Virus Characterization**  
Genetic and antigenic characterization and antiviral susceptibility of viruses collected in the U.S. this season is now being reported.

**Severe Disease**  
Hospitalizations  
The overall hospitalization rate for the season is 2.0 per 100,000. This is similar to what has been seen at this time during other recent seasons.

**P&I Mortality**  
5.1% of deaths were attributed to pneumonia and influenza (P&I). This is below the epidemic threshold of 6.3%.

**Pediatric Deaths**  
One new influenza-associated pediatric death occurring during the 2019-2020 season was reported to CDC this week. The total for the season is 5. All data are preliminary and may change as more reports are received.

A description of the CDC influenza surveillance system, including methodology and detailed descriptions of each data components is available on the surveillance methods page.

Additional information on the current and previous influenza seasons for each surveillance component are available on FluView Interactive. (Courtesy <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/#PublicHealthLaboratories>)

**Key Points**  
•Nationally, ILI activity has been at or above baseline for three weeks; however, the amount of influenza activity across the country varies with the south and parts of the west seeing elevated activity while other parts of the country are still seeing low activity.  
•There is significant cocirculation of influenza B/Victoria, A(H1N1)pdm09, and

A(H3N2) viruses with the predominant virus varying by region and age group.  
•The flu season is just getting started. It's not too late to get vaccinated. Flu vaccination is always the best way to prevent flu and its potentially serious complications. (Courtesy <https://www.cdc.gov/>)



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**Diverting Rangers Is A Way To Direct Federal Resources To The Border Without The Need For Congressional Approval**

**Trump Deploys ‘Surge’ Of Park Rangers To Patrol Mexican Border**



Mountain ridges in Zion national park, Utah. (Photo/Getty Images)

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

The Trump administration is sending a new “surge” of rangers from US national parks such as Zion, Yosemite and the National Mall to patrol the southern border for crossings by illegal immigrants. Continuing a controversial policy initiated in 2018, rangers who work in law enforcement will be dispatched to Organ Pipe Cactus national monument on the Arizona and Mexico border as well as Big Bend national park on the border in south-west Texas. Donald Trump has been unable to obtain funding for his border emergency plan, which includes an increase in immigration enforcement officials as well as large sums for border wall construction. Diverting rangers from national parks is a way to direct federal resources to the border without the need for congressional approval.



Valerie Naylor, a former National Park Service (NPS) superintendent who worked for the agency for 31 years, said she was troubled by the idea of rangers being tasked with arresting migrants instead of protecting the parks where they work. “My concern is sending rangers from parks that are already understaffed specifically to work with border patrol in areas that are outside the mission of the National Park Service,” she said. “This potentially puts visitors at risk, certainly resources at risk, in the parks they are leaving.” Since the fiscal year 2011, the National Park Service has seen an 11% reduction in staff while experiencing a 19% increase in visitation. Trump’s proposed 2020 budget, which includes considerable increases in border security spending, cuts the NPS budget cut by \$481m. “This is coming at a time when national parks are experiencing the most significant staff and funding shortages in American history,” said Laiken Jordahl, borderlands campaigner for the Center for Biological Diversity who previously worked for the NPS for two years. “It’s a publicity stunt with genuine consequences.”



The “pilot” program was initially set to last just 90 days but has been extended into the fall of 2020, according to High Country News. Federal officials have been tight-lipped about the number of rangers taking part in three-week rotations at national parks on the border. The NPS declined to provide the number of rangers reassigned to these duties since 2018 to the Guardian..

“The National Park Service continues to support our federal partners by deploying law enforcement personnel to Department of the Interior managed lands along the southern border,” said a spokesperson. “Due to operational security, we will not be disclosing any additional information about our officers assisting in the operations.”

A recent investigation by USA Today found that numerous parks are involved in the program, including the Great Smoky Mountains national park in North Carolina, Wrangell-St Elias national park in Alaska, the National Mall in Washington DC, and Zion national park. Andrew Fitzgerald, deputy chief ranger at Zion national park, confirmed to the Guardian that they would be sending three rangers to the border by the end of the year for three-week rotations.



Critics have questioned the efficacy of these rotations, because while national park law enforcement rangers are trained to enforce federal laws, they are not necessarily well versed in the complexities

of immigration enforcement. “This new directive rotates rangers from places like the National Mall, Redwood Park and Yosemite,” said Jorhdahl, referring to national parks not located along the border. “They are essentially sending people down there that have no idea how to do the job.”

Naylor said that “rangers are exceptionally well trained”. The problem is of a different kind.

Rangers are commonly redeployed from one park to another to deal with a crisis – a fire, for instance. “Whether sending them [rangers] to the border meets that need, that criterion – well, I would question that,” she said. (Courtesy the Guardian)

**Related**  
**Critics Decry ‘Publicity Stunt With Genuine Consequences’ as Trump Deploys ‘Surge’ of Park Rangers to Patrol Southern Border**



**Border Patrol agents detain a 14-year-old boy from Guatemala who was arrested after illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexico border alone in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument National Monument and UNESCO biosphere reserve on Jan. 18, 2019 in Ajo, Arizona. (Photo/The Washington Post via Getty Images)**

Critics of the Trump administration’s immigration policies raised alarm Tuesday over a so-called “surge” of park rangers that the Interior Department is deploying to patrol the U.S.-Mexico border as House Democrats refuse to fund President Donald Trump’s long-promised border wall.

Valerie Naylor, a former National Park Service (NPS) superintendent who worked for the agency for over three decades, expressed worries about rangers arresting migrants crossing the border rather than protecting public lands.

“My concern is sending rangers from parks that are already understaffed specifically to work with border patrol in areas that are outside the mission of the National Park Service,” Naylor told The Guardian. “This potentially puts visitors at risk, certainly resources at risk, in the parks they are leaving.”

NPS has sent rangers from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park in Alaska, the National Mall in Washington, and Zion National Park in Utah—and other sites—to work with border agents in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge in Arizona as well as Big Bend National Park in Texas, USA Today reported last month. The deployments are expected to continue through at least September 2020.



Laiken Jordahl, a campaigner at the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) and former NPS contractor, pointed out to The Guardian that “this is coming at a time when national parks are experiencing the most significant staff and funding shortages in American history.” He warned, “It’s a publicity stunt with genuine consequences.” Environmental justice reporter Yessenia Funes offered similar criticism of the administration sending park rangers to the borderlands in a piece for EARTHER. “This type of action not only threatens the public lands these park rangers were hired to protect; it also threatens the Department of Interior’s efforts to help diversify visitors to national parks and other lands,” she wrote. “Making park rangers, in essence, border patrol officers erodes the trust the agency has attempted to build with immigrant communities—especially Latinx families.” (Courtesy <https://www.commondreams.org/>)

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