Obamacare sign-ups flooded unhealthy Bronx

By Shant Shahrigian
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As the deadline approached for initiating the process on New York State of Health, the online marketplace for coverage plans available through the Affordable Care Act, a Navigator charged with helping individuals sign up at Riverdale Neighborhood House (RNH) reported an increase in the number of people making appointments with him.

“We are... trying to book as many appointments as we can,” Kwadwo Bediako said on March 26. “We used to do it in an hour. But now because we have so many people coming in... we have to try to do the application in 30 minutes.”

Mr. Bediako has worked every Tuesday and Wednesday out of a small, undecorated office at RNH’s 5521 Mosholu Ave. building since October. Mr. Bediako, an employee of the nonprofit BronxWorks, said while his first few months on the job saw just a few people per day visit him, as many as eight or more people per day sought his help in March.

He was on the front lines of the state and federal effort to enroll 1.1 million people via New York State of Health by 2016, with the final deadline to finish the process in this year’s cycle set for April 15.

On March 28, state Department of Health (DOH) figures put the number of people who successfully signed up for one of several private health insurance plans or for Medicaid at 782,472. The department said more than 70 percent of enrollees lacked any health insurance at the time of their applications.

Mr. Bediako and the program manager for BronxWorks, a large nonprofit that hosts homeless shelters and other programs, as well as experts interviewed for this article hailed the local effort to sign people up for health care as a success. The sign-ups are arguably especially important in Bronx County, which recently ranked dead last in a major survey of health in every county in the state.

Mr. Bediako recounted working with people including a woman who was curt with him...
until he helped her finish a health care application, saying the process enabled her to receive surgery for an ulcer after having previously lost her health care coverage.