



HealthCare.gov's Lessons for Big Government

By: Joseph Marks - December 4, 2013

The troubled rollout of HealthCare.gov, the Obama administration's online health insurance marketplace, got a big picture treatment from historians and economists on Wednesday, during a hearing before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

At issue was whether the government is capable of implementing large programs such as Obamacare and the website that supports it or if the inefficiencies inherent in government work make such initiatives impossible.

Republican committee members and panelists from the right-leaning Cato Institute and the Mercatus Center at George Mason University outlined the challenges government faces when implementing large programs, including that federal employees are rarely fired or otherwise punished when their systems fail and are rarely rewarded for taking risks or performing above expectation.

They also noted that government agencies tend to be more saddled by bureaucracy and more beholden to special interests than the private sector.

"Something as complicated, as complex, as multifaceted as a Web portal that's supposed to rival sites like Amazon.com for health care is something the government was clearly not prepared to take on and do properly," Oversight Chairman Darrell Issa, R-Calif., said, referring to HealthCare.gov.

Democratic members and Karen Kruse Thomas, a historian with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, argued that government is capable of taking on large projects to fix market failures in the private sector and to bring comfort and security to the disenfranchised. They cited social security, Medicare and other social programs as evidence.

Democrats accused Republican members of exploiting HealthCare.gov's troubles to make an unwarranted larger argument about government's capacity to do big things.

"I understand the logic behind free market principles, but I think corporations certainly aren't going to look out for the poorest and least fortunate among us," said the committee's ranking member Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md.