Editorial on the Birthday of Medicare

On July 30, 2010 it will be 45 years since President Johnson witnessed President Truman's application for Medicare and presented him with the first Medicare card in United States history. Medicare was America's first form of universal health care and continues to be of immense value to people who reach 65 years old or otherwise become eligible for benefits, providing worry-free protection when health issues arise. No matter what happens, Medicare stays with beneficiaries as long as they live.

The monthly cost for President Truman's Medicare plan was $3. In 1965 the annual rate of inflation was 1.59%, gas cost 31 cents per gallon, the average cost of a new car was $2,650 and a loaf of bread cost 21 cents. Today President Truman's monthly premium would be $110.50, "sticker shock" for some new enrollees who have not realized they will pay a premium for Medicare's Part B medical coverage plus 20% of costs out of their own pocket. The premium for Part A is prepaid during our working years. It pays for inpatient hospital care with a $1,100 deductible.

Now 45 years later, we are on the crest of a wave of people aging into Medicare. While coverage has improved, Medicare plans are complex, requiring beneficiaries to make decisions that require use of the Internet or a meeting with a trained professional or volunteer at an Agency on Aging to explore their options. Decisions must be made for supplemental plans; prescription drug plans; and health care plans that offer private Medicare coverage and may save some beneficiaries premium costs. Clearly these are not decisions that can wait until several days before retirement.

Since 2005 when prescription drug coverage became law, insurance companies have flooded the market with options and benefits that can change from year to year. During the last five years more than 50 plans have been available for purchase just in the state of Maine. For most beneficiaries, this is the first time they have had to make long-range decisions about health insurance. These important choices should be made with help from an unbiased resource, such as an Agency on Aging.

Maine's Agencies on Aging welcome all current beneficiaries to call for an appointment to review their Medicare and health insurance options annually.

For those who will become eligible for Medicare in the next year, I urge you to call this statewide, toll-free number, 1-877-353-3771, for an appointment to learn more about one of the best things that happened in the 1960s.

Here in Scarborough we offer "Welcome to Medicare" seminars for up to 20 people each week, and satellite locations serve people closer to Windham or

Springvale. During open enrollment (November 15 to December 31, 2010) additional sites throughout York and Cumberland counties will serve thousands of older people.

In spite of the fact that federal funding does not cover our costs, Southern Maine Agency on Aging has responded by training 12 of our social workers and more than 50 volunteers to help guide older people and those with a disability make their best individual decisions. We have also partnered with hospitals, nursing homes and other providers to train their employees on Medicare and health insurance benefits for their older patients and residents. We don't charge a fee but tax-deductible donations are always welcome.

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