

Nov 28 2005 - Slaughter Calls on HHS to Improve Quality of Medicare Information Services

Slaughter Calls on HHS to Improve Quality of Medicare Information Services

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-Fairport), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, has appealed to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to improve the reliability of their Medicare information services. In a letter to Mark McClellan, Administrator for the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), Rep. Slaughter expressed her concerns regarding the difficulty individuals are having accessing critical health care information using the CMS website and information hotline.

"The ramifications for CMS's failure to provide timely, comprehensible, and accurate information are enormous and could detrimentally impact our seniors' ability to make informed decisions and access quality health care," Rep. Slaughter said in the letter. "Because these sources provide vital information needed to research and identify the suitability and cost effectiveness of prescription drug plans for each beneficiary, it is imperative that they be readily accessible and that the information provided is easily understood and correct," she added.

Rep. Slaughter concluded by calling on Dr. McClellan "to take immediate action to make the improvements to both the website and 800 number to ensure that all inquiries are answered quickly and accurately."

The letter is in response to mounting confusion over Medicare's new Part D Prescription Drug Coverage, the federal government's effort to provide millions of older Americans with a more affordable way to pay for their prescription medication. Part D will benefit many people, but its savings are not universal. The annual costs of its many plans can vary by thousands of dollars, leaving applicants with important decisions to make regarding which plan to adopt. The quickest and easiest way to access and compare plans is via the Internet. However, not only are many seniors only occasional users of the Internet, but the HHS's website is complicated and often inactive. A toll-free CMS help-line has also been plagued by poor and inaccurate service.

The complete text of Rep. Slaughter's letter to Dr. McClellan is included below:

November 28, 2005

Mark McClellan, M.D., PhD.

Administrator

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

Department of Health and Human Services

200 Independence Ave., SW

Washington, DC 20201

Dear Dr. McClellan:

We are writing to express our deep concern about the near inaccessibility of Medicare's website (www.medicare.gov) during peak online hours and the quality of service provided to individuals calling the Medicare 800 number for information about the upcoming Medicare Prescription Drug plan. The ramifications for CMS's failure to provide timely, comprehensible, and accurate information are enormous and could detrimentally impact our seniors' ability to make informed decisions and access quality health care. We call upon you to take immediate action to make the improvements to both the website and 800 number to ensure that all inquiries are answered quickly and accurately.

As you are aware, November 15th marked the onset of a six month sign up period for the nation's new Medicare Part D Prescription Drug plan. Subsequently, thousands upon thousands of senior citizens, people living with disabilities and countless others who are assisting them, must be able to access the Medicare website and 800 number. Because these sources provide vital information needed to research and identify the suitability and cost effectiveness of prescription drug plans for each beneficiary, it is imperative that they be readily accessible and that the information provided is easily understood and correct.

We are asking you to take immediate action to ensure the Medicare.gov website is available and accessible at all times and that operators manning the 800 number are properly trained to address Medicare beneficiaries' inquiries.

We appreciate your attention to this request, and will await your response.

Sincerely,