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HEALTH

Discount Drug Card: Help Or Headache?

■ Despite Upbeat Report, Confusion Lingers

July 20, 2004

By JOHN A. MacDONALD, Courant Staff Writer

WASHINGTON -- In an upbeat report, Medicare's top official told Congress Monday that nearly 4 million seniors have signed up for the government's new prescription drug discount card since the program began six weeks ago.

Other analysts, speaking separately, said confusion among seniors continues to depress enrollment and that the confusion is a prime reason Republicans have not reaped expected political gains from the discount card, part of the largest expansion of Medicare in the program's history.

Enrollment in the discount card program has reached 3.9 million, a bit more than half of the 7.4 million expected to sign up, Dr. Mark B. McClellan said. Of the 3.9 million, 2.5 million were automatically enrolled through Medicare HMO plans.

"It's definitely continuing at a steady clip," McClellan said of enrollment. "The numbers are picking up. ... This program is delivering real savings."

McClellan said savings are deeper than Medicare initially projected, ranging from 11 percent to 18 percent for brand-name drugs and 37 percent to 65 percent for generic drugs. Medicare had originally forecast savings ranging from 10 percent to 25 percent for all classes of drugs.

"Enrollment in the drug card is a simple process," McClellan said to the Senate Special Committee on Aging. Medicare officials have recently changed the program's Internet site to display automatically the five lowest-priced Medicare-approved discount cards that fit each beneficiary's needs, he said.

The change was one of several that Medicare made in response to widespread complaints that enrollment is too complicated. Those complaints continued Monday.

Judith Stein, executive director of the Center for Medicare Advocacy in Willimantic, said she has spoken to hundreds of Medicare beneficiaries and found the vast majority confused about the enrollment process.

"People are stymied by the need to get information from the Internet or the [Medicare] 800 number," Stein said. "That's a huge impediment."

Medicare has encouraged beneficiaries to use the Internet to research the discount card that is best for them. But a

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recent survey by the private Kaiser Family Foundation found that 69 percent of all seniors have never used the Internet. The same survey found that 24 percent of those 65 and older have a favorable impression of the legislation that Congress passed last fall. The measure established the discount card to serve as a bridge to a broader Medicare prescription drug benefit to start in 2006.

"People do not feel like anybody's done them a favor," said Geoffrey D. Garin, president of the polling firm that usually works for Democrats.

Bill McInturff, co-founder of a polling firm that caters to Republicans, said, "People are starting with a slightly unfavorable feeling. They're hearing more positive stuff than negative stuff."

Republicans say Democrats have been unrelenting in their criticism of the Medicare measure. But President Bush rarely mentions the legislation in his stump speeches, and not all criticism comes from politicians. Last weekend, newspapers in cities as far apart as Kansas City and York, Pa., blasted the measure.

In an editorial, the York Daily Record, in conservative southeastern Pennsylvania, said, "If Congress truly served the public, it would abort this monstrosity and start over - this time keeping the interests of the governed above political concerns."

Meanwhile, a new poll of battleground states found voters believe Sen. John F. Kerry would do a better job making prescription drugs more affordable by a margin of 52 percent to 32 percent. In an analysis of the findings, Ed Goeas, a Republican pollster, said, "The Republican majority in Congress has clearly been hurt by an inability to get their message out" on Medicare, education, Social Security and the economy.

Others said Medicare beneficiaries simply do not like what they've seen. After a recent meeting in Connecticut, Stein said she spoke to two women. One said the discount card enrollment "was way too difficult"; the other did not have the mental capacity to negotiate the enrollment process, Stein said. "They're just baffled."

The discount card was targeted at the 25 percent of Medicare beneficiaries who have no prescription drug insurance. Beneficiaries can sign up anytime until the program expires at the end of next year. Those who do not enroll will continue to pay full price for prescription drugs. Medicare receives about 50,000 calls a day on its assistance hot line. McClellan said the average wait time is less than two minutes.

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