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Local News - Tuesday, April 27, 2004

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Seniors demand answers on Medicare drug benefit

By ADAM BOWLES

Norwich Bulletin

NORWICH -- Lee Dupont pays out of pocket for the prescription drugs she needs to treat acid reflux disease, cholesterol problems and high blood pressure.

"It's an expensive proposition," the 78-year-old Norwich resident said Monday, adding she spends "quite a few hundred dollars" a month on prescriptions.

Medicare's new prescription drug cards may provide her some relief. But first she must endure a complicated process of figuring out which of the cards is best for her.

She joined 300 other people -- most of them elderly -- at a forum on Medicare's drug coverage at the Rose City Senior Center.

The nearly three-hour event lasted 45 minutes longer than anticipated and attracted twice as many people as expected, forcing panel members to promise to mail information to audience members after they ran out of hand-outs.

Norwich Bulletin Publisher Ellen Lind moderated a panel of 10 people with varying expertise on Medicare.

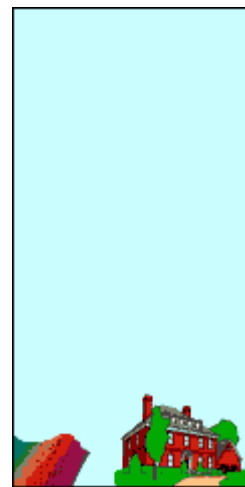


Photos by John Shishmanian/Norwich Bulletin

Addiga Walmsley of Taftville, left, Agnes Lotring of Norwich, center, and Joyce Pavent of New London join a standing room only crowd for a Medicare prescription drug discount card panel discussion at the Rose City Senior Center in Norwich Monday. About 300 people attended.



Members of the panel include, from left,



The audience booed U.S. Rep. Rob Simmons, R-2nd District, Brenda Kelley, director of the Connecticut chapter of the AARP, and John Swen, senior director of U.S. Science Policy and Public Affairs for Pfizer, as they spoke positively about the Medicare reform.

Many seniors whispered their distrust of the speakers and complained that the Medicare reform would profit everyone but them.

But they applauded state Sen. Edith Prague, D-Columbia, who called the Medicare act a disaster because it did not control the price of prescription drugs and did not guarantee that the cards' monthly premiums would stay under \$35.

The audience settled down after the introductions but they periodically hissed or booed the speakers.

"Regardless of what one thinks of the law, it is law now," said attorney Judith Stein, executive director of the Center for Medicare Advocacy.

Leslie Norwalk, acting deputy administrator for the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, urged the audience to put aside politics to consider the positive aspects of the Medicare reform.

She said it was good that the drug coverage was voluntary, accessible, affordable and allowed competition among private companies that would help drive down retail prices.

The cards are expected to save beneficiaries 10-25 percent off retail prices and up to \$1,200 more for qualified low-income seniors. Voluntary enrollment for the cards begins May 3 and the cards become active June 1.

AARP expects that 19 of the 28 Medicare-approved drug companies will offer discount cards in Connecticut.

The full Medicare prescription drug benefit begins in January 2006.

Several of the panel members acknowledged that Medicare's drug coverage reform

U.S. Rep. Rob Simmons, R-2nd District, Michael Starkowski, deputy commissioner Connecticut Department Social Services, John Swen, Pfizer senior director U.S. Science Policy and Public Affairs, and Janet Nelson, regional CHOICES coordinator, Senior Resources Agency on Aging.

Medicare by the numbers

- Prior to the creation of Medicare in 1965, less than 60 percent of the population 65 or older had medical insurance. Now 93 percent of those 65 and older have medical insurance.
- 11 million seniors nationwide have no access to prescription drug coverage.
- In 1963, 40 percent of businesses provided health insurance. In 2000, 24 percent of businesses provided health insurance.
- 525,000 seniors in Connecticut are eligible for Medicare and its new prescription drug coverage.
- Experts estimate 7.3 million seniors and people with disabilities nationwide will sign up for Medicare's new discount cards.
- Experts estimated 4.7 million low-income individuals will receive more than \$5 billion in transitional assistance benefits.

Sources: AARP; Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

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was complicated. The panel members themselves questioned each other on certain aspects of the discount cards.

In one exchange, Prague and Norwalk argued some of the facts that were presented.

Steve and Joyce Rinn, 69 and 64 respectively, will lose health insurance coverage when Joyce Rinn turns 65 next month and her coverage through Rogers Corp. in Windham expires. Steve Rinn was included in his wife's insurance plan.


The Lebanon couple said they can afford prescription drug costs because of their pensions and Social Security payments.

But they still want to be diligent about choosing the most cost-effective drug coverage.

Steve Rinn is a member of AARP and plans to go to the organization for more information and to take its advice on which card he should select.

"I heard a lot but I still don't know what I'm going to do," he said.

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