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Medicare drug plan revised, repackaged to cure its ills

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As the nation's top health-care official swept through the Eastlake JFK Senior Center on Tuesday encouraging people to sign up for Medicare drug coverage, the Bush administration issued new rules for next year to avoid the serious glitches that have afflicted the program.

Mike Leavitt, chief of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, congratulated Agnes Cardinale for finding a Medicare drug plan that will save her money on her drug bill.

"You're not going to spend it all in one place, are you?" Leavitt asked.

"No," said Cardinale, 78, who lives in Chesterland. She used to run short on money for food when she paid for her medicine.

She signed up in January. Leavitt is crisscrossing the country this week trying to convince more seniors to do so.

Leavitt was visiting an enrollment session hosted by Rep. Steven LaTourette at which each senior paired with a Medicare counselor to view computer-screen lists of drug plans.

The deadline for signing up this year is May 15, but no one at the session enrolled Tuesday.

In 2007, insurance companies offering Medicare drug coverage will have to answer 80 percent of their customers' calls within 30 seconds, according to a 45-page letter the government sent companies this week.

Frustrated seniors and pharmacists have reported spending hours trying to get through. While the wait has improved, no time limits are specified now.

Other changes address the problems that forced some seniors to leave the pharmacy without their drugs: incorrect pricing, medication not covered and lack of enrollment verification.

Leavitt discussed the new requirements during an interview with The Plain Dealer. He said changes were expected and didn't mean the current program is flawed.

"When Medicare was rolled out in 1965, it got better in 1966," Leavitt said.

"We will all get better at this. Government will be better at its part. The pharmacists will get better at managing the system, and consumers will be better informed."

The government is trying to make it easier for seniors to choose a plan next year by reducing the wide variety of choices - even though President Bush and others have said seniors deserve plenty of options.

Vicki Gottlich, an attorney at the Center for Medicare Advocacy, said that having fewer plans is a good idea.

"They're saying the plans were difficult to understand and difficult to compare because there were so many variations," said Gottlich, who filed comments on the proposed changes for national consumer groups of seniors.

"Who needs 40 plans that all do the same thing?"

Under the new rules, if a company wants to offer more than two plans, one should be a basic policy with a \$250 deductible. The second can be a variation of equivalent value, and the third should be an enhanced alternative that reduces the built-in gap in Medicare drug coverage.

Charles Hallberg, president of Solon-based MemberHealth, which offers a national drug plan called Community Care Rx, said very few plans cover the gap because "it's a risky proposition" for many companies.

Another change requires plans to address shortcomings in the transition policy intended to help consumers adjust to their new coverage when it doesn't cover the drugs they have been using.

This year, plans are supposed to provide a temporary 30-day supply of a noncovered drug - a 90-day supply in the case of nursing home residents.

That will remain the same, but companies will have to tell consumers that such prescriptions are temporary and that they will have to switch to a covered drug.

Companies will also have to tell consumers they have a right to request that their drug be covered.

Gottlich said temporary drug refills should be provided for 90 days for all beneficiaries and should be mandatory.

Hallberg said a 30-day supply is sufficient and predicted that fewer people will be needing it as the transition process becomes more manageable.

Other new requirements include updating enrollment information weekly instead of monthly to prevent coverage delays.

"The plans will be better next year," Leavitt promised.

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