

***NEW BENEFICIARY ASSISTANCE IN FINDING THE HIGHEST-VALUE HEALTH COVERAGE***

CMS has taken many steps to increase beneficiary assistance and seeks comments on how to further improve our ability to help beneficiaries get the personalized assistance they need to get the most out of Medicare's expanded benefits and out of our increasingly modern, but increasingly complex, health care system. These steps would build on recent enhancements at 1-800-MEDICARE so that beneficiaries can get additional support in identifying the best drug plans and health plan options for their needs. CMS has increased the number of customer service operators from several hundred to 3,000 as of the beginning of June 2004, and expects to maintain this number of trained representatives to handle the unprecedented number of callers in a timely and effective manner. CMS has added voice messages to help callers be better prepared when they reach a customer service representative, further reducing call waiting and call handling time.

CMS also intends to continue and enhance the use of informational mailings to help beneficiaries understand the new Medicare benefits and how to get the most out of these benefits. These publications will also be available online at [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov). Numerous mailings have already been sent to beneficiaries to help them learn about, and enroll in, the Medicare-approved drug discount cards.

Additionally, CMS plans to mail *Medicare & You* 2005 handbooks to beneficiaries and stakeholders. This will occur in the fall. Handbooks are offered in English and Spanish, and also they are available in Braille and large print.

The CMS national advertising campaign utilizes television, radio, print, and Internet advertising, to inform and motivate beneficiaries and their caregivers to call 1-800-MEDICARE, visit [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov), and refer to the *Medicare & You* Handbook for answers to their Medicare questions. The last week of April 2004, a new TV and print ad campaign was initiated for the Medicare-approved drug card, and new advertising will be launched in the fall.

For beneficiaries who require or prefer face-to-face personalized assistance, CMS has also enhanced its partnership with the State Health Insurance Assistance Programs (SHIPs). CMS recently announced that HHS will award \$21.1 million this year, and another \$31.7 million next year, to the SHIPs, thereby reflecting the increased emphasis on one-on-one advice and counseling for Medicare beneficiaries. The SHIPs are among the most effective resources in helping beneficiaries learn about the changes to Medicare and will be able to use the additional funds to equip local organizations with the tools needed to answer beneficiaries' questions.

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CMS is also supporting non-profit organizations to help educate and assist low-income beneficiaries who may otherwise be hard to reach and recently announced the availability of \$4.6 million in subcontracts to small community-based organizations, such as the members of the Access To Benefits Coalition, to help beneficiaries learn about the \$600 in transitional assistance money available through the Medicare-approved drug discount card. CMS is seeking comments on how to use SHIPs, as well as private organizations, to help further improve our personalized outreach and support.

Comments on the proposed regulations will be accepted until October 4, 2004. Comments should be submitted to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services at [www.cms.hhs.gov/regulations/ecomments](http://www.cms.hhs.gov/regulations/ecomments)