

Thousands Fail to Pay Premiums

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Medicare 'Bug'

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By Philip Meyer

Chicago Daily News Service

Thousands of elderly workers have gotten off to a bad start with Medicare by failing to pay their premiums on time, the Social Security Administration has reported.

Delinquency rates for the \$3-a-month payments are running as high as 50 per cent in some parts of the South, a spokesman said. Nationally, it is about 30 per cent. The payments were due July 1.

The slow payments represent only one of several bugs to appear in the massive machinery of Medicare during its first six weeks of operation. However, the program generally is working better than expected.

The problem of delinquent payment affects only the group of 2 million Medicare beneficiaries who are still working. Those who have retired have the monthly \$3 checked off their retirement benefits.

Elderly workers who signed up for Plan B, the part of Medicare that covers doctor bills, were billed for \$9 to cover the program's first three months. Payments of \$3 or \$6 also are accepted.

3 Months Grace Period

No one has yet lost any benefits for failure to pay, a Social Security spokesman said. The grace period is three months.

Biggest lag in premium payments is in Southern States, where as many as 50 per cent of the beneficiaries who are supposed to pay in cash failed to send in the money on time.

"We think there's some confusion," an official said.

The \$3 premium is matched by another \$3 from the Federal Treasury to support the program. It pays 80 per cent of doctor bills after the first \$50.

That \$50 deductible is also causing some confusion, the official reported.

"Some people thought they had to pay the first \$50 charged by each doctor they saw," he said. "Others thought it was a premium they had to pay whether they needed a doctor or not."

As the rule actually works, the \$50 deductible must be met only once in each calendar year.

Another problem reported to the Social Security Administration headquarters by district offices is that many people who turn 65 are late in signing up for Plan B.

Should Join Before 65

Those who wait for their 65th birthday to enroll miss the first month of eligibility. The proper time for joining is from one to three months before the birthday.

Once enrolled, many persons have caused themselves unnecessary inconvenience by becoming "overly protective" of their Medicare cards.

The wallet-sized cards are issued to identify beneficiaries to doctors and hospitals. Some people are so afraid of losing them, they have rented safe deposit boxes to store them in. Others have sent them to sons or daughters in distant cities for safekeeping.

"The card isn't all that important," the Social Security spokesman said. "It's nice to have, but losing it won't keep you from getting benefits. The worst that can happen is the inconvenience of applying for a new card."

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