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## **Medicare Law Improves Treatment of Chronic Illnesses, Drives Health Care Costs Down**

By Congresswoman Nancy L. Johnson

The new Medicare law will do more than make prescription drugs more affordable for America's seniors. It will also keep seniors healthier and bring skyrocketing health care costs down.

The Medicare law is already saving seniors money on the drugs they need. The Medicare-approved discount cards will save the average Connecticut senior \$1,100 over the next 18 months, according to the nonpartisan Healthcare Leadership Council.

When the card program ends and the Medicare prescription drug coverage begins in 2006, seniors will save even more. Seniors with very low incomes will pay less than \$5 for each prescription they fill – with no premium, no deductible, no gap in coverage. That's a better deal for low-income seniors than the state's popular ConnPACE program.

We've long known about the crunch the high cost of health care puts on American families, especially seniors living on fixed incomes, pensions and Social Security checks.

A new study confirms why: chronic illnesses like diabetes and heart disease account for a majority of the \$200 billion rise in health care costs in the last two decades.

The study tracked 370 conditions and their costs from 1987 to 2000 and found that just 15 accounted for a whopping 56 percent of the increase in health care costs during that time. And just five common conditions – heart disease, pulmonary conditions like asthma, mental illnesses, cancer, and hypertension – accounted for one-third of the increase.

Indeed, one third of seniors have four or more chronic illnesses and account for 70 percent of Medicare's spending.

The conclusion? Chronic illnesses are by far the biggest driver of health care costs in this country and are the biggest obstacle to affordable health care.

Experts agree that keeping people healthier, and managing chronic illnesses to prevent them from getting worse, is the best way to solve this problem. In short, we need to play offense with chronic illnesses, not defense.

Take heart disease, for example. Twelve million Americans suffer from heart disease and it accounts for a greater share of health care cost increases than any other chronic illness.

Why? Because until last year, Medicare covered the \$20,000 average yearly cost of hospitalizations for congestive heart failure. It did not cover inexpensive cholesterol screenings, nor did it cover the \$70 monthly cost of cholesterol medications. This system defies common sense and good medicine.

But now, because of the new law, Medicare will cover the less expensive medications that help keep seniors healthy and out of the hospital. This will drive health care costs down and drastically improve the quality of life for seniors.

There's more. The Medicare law also creates new benefits – such as a “Welcome to Medicare” physical and screenings for heart disease and diabetes – to diagnose chronic conditions earlier when they are most treatable. The old saying “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” has never had greater meaning.

If you are diagnosed with a chronic illnesses, Medicare stands ready to help. Eight million American seniors suffer from diabetes. Now Medicare will work with them and their doctor to help control diet, monitor blood sugar and drug regimens, and improve overall health. This team effort to effectively manage chronic illness is now a part of Medicare, and it will work with up to 300,000 seniors across the country who suffer from chronic illnesses in the next few years before expanding it to all seniors.

The relatively few chronic illnesses driving so much of our rising health care costs scream for the comprehensive, proactive approach taken in the Medicare law. Because of this landmark law, Medicare isn't just a bill-payer anymore. It is now a partner to keep seniors healthier, ensure they have access to affordable prescription drugs, and drive health care costs down for all Americans.

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