



LTCPA

Long Term Care
Pharmacy Alliance

November 17, 2005

President George W. Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Bush,

This is a crucial and, unfortunately, confusing time for America's seniors.

As the enrollment period for the new Medicare prescription drug plan begins this week, many of the nation's 1.6 million nursing home residents remain unaware or confused about how the program works.

Becoming enrolled in the right plan is enormously confusing and challenging process for all seniors, but especially for millions of nursing home residents, many of whom suffer cognitive as well as physical impairments that make even the process of considering plans difficult, if not impossible. A typical nursing home resident is 84 years of age, suffers from eight different diseases and is on about nine different medications at any given time. Over half of all nursing home residents have some level of cognitive impairment.

As Richard Mollet, Executive Director of the Long Term Care Community Coalition recently told the Orlando Sentinel newspaper: "The [Medicare plans] are hard enough to figure out for a 65-year-old with a college degree and a computer at home. There are a lot of frail, impoverished people in nursing homes who are going to fall through the cracks and suffer and die because of it."

Fortunately, nursing home care providers and pharmacists are knowledgeable about nursing home residents' medical needs and are legally responsible for their care. They could provide valuable advice and assistance to nursing home residents and their families, making it easier for them to choose the right plan.

Unfortunately, the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services has written rules that deny nursing home residents the opportunity to receive that help. Instead, they insist that nursing home staff and pharmacists must simply direct seniors to the Medicare website or the 1-800-MEDICARE phone number which offer information, but no recommendation as to the best plan for them.

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A Kaiser Family Foundation survey released this past week showed 76% percent of seniors have never surfed the web, and only 8% of seniors have ever called the 1-800-MEDICARE phone number. Those options are even less helpful for nursing home residents, a majority of whom are cognitively impaired and in frail health. The same survey also found 75% of seniors expect their pharmacist to be knowledgeable about the plans.

The stakes for nursing home residents are especially high, even for those Medicaid-eligible seniors who will be automatically and randomly assigned one of perhaps dozens of plans by CMS. Beyond the basic issues of drugs covered and plan costs, plan details which restrict or delay immediate access to drugs can have serious health implications for nursing home residents. Nursing home residents need help in accessing those differences and becoming enrolled in the right plan for them.

We have met with CMS staff to share our concerns, but so far CMS continues to insist that their Internet plan finder and toll free phone number are sufficient tools for nursing home residents. They continue to oppose allowing in-person advice on plan selection from nursing home care providers and pharmacists.

That needs to change. Nursing home care providers and pharmacists want to help, and they should be allowed to help. Simply telling them to point frail elderly nursing home residents towards a computer keypad or a telephone is not good enough.

CMS recognized the special and changing medical needs of nursing home residents when it gave them the right to switch drug plans monthly to ensure they are enrolled in the right plan. It also recognized those special needs when it guaranteed nursing residents access to specialized long-term care pharmacy services. Now, we need them to recognize that nursing home residents need and deserve real help in enrolling in the right plan.

Like you, we want to see the new drug program be successful in helping nursing home residents. But for that to happen, those residents need help from their knowledgeable care providers to end the confusion that threatens to turn the opportunity for affordable prescription drug coverage into a very real nightmare.

Sincerely,

Paul Baldwin
Executive Director
Long Term Care Pharmacy Alliance

cc: Members of the U.S. House of Representatives
Members of the United States Senate