

Deadline Looms on Complicated Drug Plan

By Senators Hollis French and Johnny Ellis

We understand how important it is for seniors to have access to affordable prescription drugs and like many of you, we were concerned when Congress passed new Medicare regulations in 2003. Quite frankly, we were disappointed with the ridiculously complicated plan President Bush and Congress developed, because we feel it benefits the pharmaceutical companies more than Medicare recipients. However, now that the new regulations are in place, we want to make sure you have the information you need to make informed decisions about your health care. That's why we wanted to update you on **Medicare Part D**, which goes into effect January 1, 2006.

If you are over the age of 65, or have been disabled for over two years, you are eligible for the new prescription drug benefit. However, if you have another pension with drug benefits, or a private insurance plan, Medicare Part D may not be right for you. In October, you should have received a "Credible Insurance Letter" from your insurance provider. This letter would have advised you whether or not to enroll in Medicare's prescription drug plan, depending on your current benefit. If you did not receive the letter, we encourage you to call your insurance provider.

When you are deciding to enroll in Medicare Part D, you will need to see if there is a coverage plan that fits your needs. Twenty-seven separate plans were created for Alaskans, varying by cost and coverage. For most of these plans, the monthly premiums range from \$20-\$62, with a \$250 deductible. Part D will cover 75% of the costs of the next \$2000, then none of the next \$2,850, then 95% of any remaining drug bills. There are some plans with different cost-sharing arrangements, including plans with no deductibles. You will need to look at each plan and see which will be right for you, depending on which medications you are currently prescribed and your income level.

If you decide to sign up for Medicare Part D, it is free to enroll until **May 15, 2006**. You will still be able to enroll after this date during the next open enrollment period (November 15-December 16, 2006), however, you will face an increased premium cost of 1% per month. If your current plan is as comprehensive or more so than Medicare Part D and you decide to drop your current plan in the future, you will not be subject to the cumulative premium increase.

Finally, if you want more information and have access to a computer, we strongly recommend you visit Medicare's webpage, <http://www.medicare.gov>. This site provides helpful information on the new regulations. It allows you to compare packages so that you can find a prescription plan that works for you. If you do not have access to a computer, or if you have any more questions, call **1-800-MEDICARE**.

We hope your New Year is off to a good start.

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