

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
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GOVERNOR PATAKI, SENATOR BRUNO, SPEAKER SILVER: MEDICARE DRUG DISCOUNT CARD PROGRAM TO ENHANCE SENIORS' ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Reach Agreement to Waive EPIC Fees for Seniors and Simplify Enrollment Process

Governor George E. Pataki, Senate Majority Leader Joseph L. Bruno, and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver today encouraged New Yorkers in Medicare to enroll in the federal government's voluntary drug discount card program to save on their prescription drug costs beginning June 1, 2004. They also urged seniors to carefully compare the benefits of the various federally approved prescription drug cards being offered in New York State.

The Governor, Senate Majority Leader and Speaker emphasized that the new federal drug discount cards will offer Medicare beneficiaries greater access to prescription drugs at more affordable prices. The cards also provide eligible low-income beneficiaries with a \$600 credit to pay for their prescription drugs. Many low-income New Yorkers enrolled in the State's Elderly Pharmaceutical Insurance Coverage (EPIC) program may also qualify for the \$600 federal credit in addition to their EPIC coverage under the new federal program.

"We're proud that our EPIC program has made New York a national leader in helping seniors afford prescription drugs and giving them access to the medications they need to stay healthy and live longer, happier lives," Governor Pataki said. "Now thanks to this new initiative, seniors across the nation will enjoy enhanced access to affordable prescription drugs under the federal Medicare drug discount card program."

Senate Majority Leader Joseph L. Bruno said, "Helping seniors afford prescription drugs so they can continue to lead healthy and active lives has always been one of the Senate's top priorities. Medicare's voluntary drug discount card program will give seniors in New York greater access to affordable prescription drugs so they can more easily obtain the medicine they need to maintain their quality of life."

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver said, "Improving access to a full complement of essential prescription drugs for older New Yorkers has been a priority for the Assembly Majority since we led the way in creating the EPIC program in 1986. The rising cost of prescription drugs has placed a terrible hardship on seniors throughout this state, particularly those living on fixed incomes. We expect that this initiative will provide significant relief from this financial burden and result in a healthier senior population in New York State."

An agreement reached today between the Governor and legislative leaders, which will be reflected in this week's interim Budget legislation, will allow New York to automatically enroll low-income EPIC members in the Medicare prescription card program and waive their EPIC fees, making the program seamless and helping them reap additional savings on their drugs while providing additional savings for the state EPIC program.

Governor Pataki said, "We also have our EPIC staff ready to assist seniors enrolled in EPIC who may be eligible for additional cost-savings under Medicare's supplemental prescription drug credit. Our priority is to make enrollment in this new program as seamless as possible for New Yorkers."

Lois Aronstein, State Director for AARP New York said, "Creating access to affordable prescription drugs is a top priority for AARP in New York State. New Yorkers should take advantage of the new Medicare drug discounts cards whenever possible to save money on their prescription drugs bills."

State Health Commissioner Antonia C. Novello, M.D., M.P.H., Dr.P.H., said, "Thanks to the Governor's expanded coverage and enhanced benefits for seniors under New York's EPIC program, more and more seniors are accessing the prescription drugs they need to live healthier lives."

Under the federal Medicare Modernization Act, the new Prescription Drug cards will provide an annual credit of \$600 to eligible low income Medicare beneficiaries, until 2006. Individuals with annual incomes up to \$12,569 or married couples with annual incomes totaling up to \$16,862 may qualify for this additional financial assistance. As part of the program, card providers may charge an annual enrollment fee of up to \$30. There is no enrollment fee for individuals and couples who qualify for the \$600 federal credit. Medicare will cover the cost of the enrollment fee for these low-income cardholders.

Neal E. Lane, Acting Director of the New York State Office for the Aging said, "I am pleased to assist Governor Pataki and the legislative leaders in their efforts to get accurate information out to our state's Medicare beneficiaries about the availability of the new federal discount prescription drug program. The cards will help many older New Yorkers who do not have prescription drug coverage with the purchase of their needed drugs. I would like the public to know that if they have questions about the new program, they can contact their local office for the aging and ask to speak to a Health Insurance Information Counseling and Assistance Program (HIICAP) counselor who can provide assistance."

HIICAP has over 350 trained counselors available across almost the entire state to answer older New Yorkers questions about Medicare, managed care, medigap and other types of health and long term care insurance and, now, the new federal discount drug cards.

New Yorkers who enroll in the Medicare drug discount card program are expected to save an average of 10 to 25 percent on selected prescription drugs. Individuals who qualify for the annual \$600 Medicare credit under the drug discount card program may use their discount card with their EPIC card to increase their savings. For example, the EPIC co-payment on a prescription that retails for \$100 would be \$20, but when combined with the Medicare credit will only cost the consumer \$3 in co-payments. To make sure that they receive the best savings under both programs, EPIC enrollees eligible for the \$600 credit should not enroll in a discount card program until they hear from EPIC.

There are a record 334,000 New Yorkers currently enrolled in New York's EPIC program and it is estimated that as many as 123,000 of those seniors may qualify for \$600 low-income credit. New Yorkers enrolled in EPIC who do not qualify for the \$600 federal Medicare credit will continue to receive their prescription drugs at the set discounted prices under EPIC -- their benefits will not be affected by the federal drug discount card program.

Under the program set forth under the federal Medicare Modernization Act of 2003, card providers will be responsible for publicly releasing prices for the prescription drugs their cards would cover, ensuring access to a comprehensive retail pharmacy network and having mechanisms in place to respond appropriately to consumer inquiries and complaints.

Individuals who are interested in applying for enrollment in the Medicare drug discount card program may contact the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services at 1-800-633-4227, the New York State Department of Health's EPIC program helpline at 1-800-332-3742, or the New York State Office for the Aging Senior Citizen's helpline at 1-800-342-9871 for assistance. Additional information is also available by clicking on the EPIC link on the New York State Department of Health's web site at: <http://www.health.state.ny.us>.

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