

EFFORTS UNDER WAY TO INTEGRATE STATE PRESCRIPTION DRUG PROGRAM WITH NEW MEDICARE PLAN

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WASHINGTON - Officials from New York's prescription discount program for seniors are urging low-income participants to hold off signing up for the new Medicare drug discount card until they finalize plans on whether to use more than one card.

Meanwhile, several senior groups, including the New York State Association of Area Agencies on Aging and the New York Statewide Senior Action Council, are calling for state health officials to rely on only one Medicare drug card and automatically enroll recipients in the federal program.

"We're just concerned that the Medicare program needs to be integrated with the EPIC program. It's [EPIC] a wonderful drug assistance program," said Thomas Yandeau, president of the New York State Association of Area Agencies on Aging. "We want to make sure that low-income EPIC beneficiaries don't lose out."

State health officials and senior groups have questioned the impact of the new Medicare law on state prescription drug plans, particularly New York's Elderly Pharmaceutical Insurance Coverage Program, considered one of the nation's most generous.

Under EPIC, seniors 65 and over with incomes less than \$35,000 for a single person or \$50,000 for a couple, can get help with their drug costs. Seniors have co-pays ranging from \$3 to \$20 depending on the drug's cost. Seniors also pay a fee or a deductible based on their income. The program has 334,000 participants.

In a letter to its 126,000 low-income seniors, EPIC officials touted benefits of the Medicare law, including the \$600 subsidy to help poor seniors pay for drugs and the discount card available June 1. It also said seniors can get the drug card and keep EPIC.

"No one is going to be forced from EPIC if they choose to stay in," said William Van Slyke, the Health Department's deputy commissioner for administration and public affairs.

More than 70 companies are offering drug discount cards, including national and regional cards. Seniors can begin enrolling tomorrow. Medicare's Web site listing the cards and drug prices went up Thursday.

Senior groups say EPIC should pick one card to be used by all participants. They said one card could streamline the process. "We're very concerned about the complexity and the confusion of this program," said Yandeau, whose members have been swamped recently with questions from seniors.

State health officials say they are working on such a proposal and should have a resolution in the next few days. "Our focus right now is ensuring a seamless transition," Van Slyke said.

Last week, officials from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, which oversees the Medicare law, announced plans to allow states to automatically enroll poor seniors in their drug assistance programs.

Federal officials said they want to make it easier for poor seniors to get the \$600 aid. The agency also simplified enrollment forms for the cards.

State officials also support automatic enrollment but must now get legislative approval.

Seniors have complained that they are confused about the Medicare law, including the drug discount card.

To add to the confusion, some sponsors of the discount cards said some drug prices on Medicare's Web site were inaccurate and could be lower.

Also yesterday, several Democratic senators urged federal officials to allow seniors a 30-day grace period to switch cards after they enroll. Right now seniors are locked into the program until the end of the year even though companies can change drugs and prices.

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