

New Medicare Drug Discount Card Program: Is It For You?

As some of you know, I voted against the Medicare Prescription Drug Plan for a number of reasons. However, the legislation passed and soon Medicare beneficiaries will soon be bombarded with advertisements, mailings, and promotions to encourage participation in a new Medicare-approved prescription drug discount card program. Enrollment began May 3 and the program will be in effect from June 2004 through December 2005. There are a number of issues to keep in mind as you evaluate your options while deciding whether to participate in this program.

Key Facts

- **Who is eligible for the card and who offers the card?** This voluntary program is open to all beneficiaries except those who also have Medicaid coverage. The cards are offered by private companies that receive approval from Medicare; card sponsors can charge an annual fee of up to \$30, and legitimate cards will carry a logo indicating Medicare approval.
- **\$600 credit for certain low-income beneficiaries.** Senior citizens and people with disabilities whose incomes are below \$12,569 a year for individuals or \$16,862 for couples, AND who are NOT enrolled in Medicaid, a retiree drug plan or Tricare will be eligible for a \$600 credit toward the purchase of prescription drugs in 2004 and again in 2005. Drug card companies may require enrollees to fill out a separate form to apply for the credit, and beneficiaries will be required to sign a form attesting to their income level.
- **No minimum discount; covered drugs, discounts and pharmacies can vary.** There is no guaranteed minimum discount under the law, and card sponsors are not required to pass on all of the savings. In addition, each card may discount different drugs and the discounts that are offered and drugs that are discounted can change weekly. Pharmacies that participate with the cards may also change during the year.
- **Choose carefully.** Although the cards can change their offerings weekly, Medicare beneficiaries can enroll in just one Medicare-approved card and will only be allowed to change cards once at the end of this year.
- **Options in Massachusetts.** In Massachusetts, there are 40 cards available. However, if you are in a Medicare HMO, you may only be able to purchase the card offered through that HMO.
- **Beware of scam artists.** Be wary of offers that sound too good to be true. Beneficiaries should never provide personal information to door-to-door salesmen or during unsolicited phone calls. Drug card sponsors must use approved application forms, and the individual cards will carry the Medicare-approved logo. Any fraud or questionable behavior should be reported immediately to 1-800-MEDICARE.
- **Need help?** Navigating the maze of available cards will be difficult. The Massachusetts SHINE Program provides information on drug card options, and can be reached at 1-800-AGE-INFO (1-800-243-4636) or at www.medicareoutreach.org. Beneficiaries can also get help by calling 1-800-MEDICARE, or by accessing information at www.medicare.gov.