

The Boston Globe

**Lawmakers detail drug-plan complaints  
Pharmacies, elders report problems**

By Jeffrey Krasner, Globe Staff  
January 6, 2006

Staffers for senators and representatives from New England states yesterday described a litany of problems with this week's rollout of the new Medicare prescription drug plan during a conference call with federal regulators.

According to staffers who participated in the private phone briefing, seniors are having problems getting prescriptions filled and pharmacists are finding it difficult to access data to determine customer's coverage status. As a result, they say, some seniors going without needed medications.

"I can't think of anything that's generated more calls and requests for help and cries of distress," said Representative Barney Frank, Democrat of Newton. "We're just busy helping individuals do what they need to get coverage. This shouldn't have happened."

Representative Martin Meehan, Democrat of Lowell, said in a statement, "My offices have been inundated with calls from seniors who are confounded" by the new drug benefit. "I opposed the law that created this program because the drug benefit is inadequate and overly complex," he said.

According to some who participated in the conference call, issues discussed included:

- Problems for pharmacies in Maine, Vermont, and Connecticut billing drug plans for prescriptions filled under the new system.
- Data problems that have made it difficult for pharmacists in Vermont to use a government help line to determine whether customers have signed up for coverage.
- A large number of seniors turned away from Cape Cod drug stores because pharmacists couldn't verify their coverage.

"This is from towns all around the Cape and different pharmacies," said Steven Broderick, a spokesman for Representative William Delahunt, Democrat of Quincy. "We'd certainly like the problem fixed before anybody else gets turned away."

Roseanne Pawelec, a spokeswoman for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, or CMS, which oversees the plan, said the conference call was intended to uncover problems so government officials can fix them.

"This call was all about working closely with our partners in the community," she said. "What we most need is for our congressional offices to supply us with specifics when

they are hearing about problems with medical benefits when seniors are at the pharmacy counter.”

The Medicare drug benefit, called Part D, took effect Sunday. Under the plan, Massachusetts seniors and many disabled people can choose from more than 40 coverage plans. They provide insurance for prescription drugs through a dizzying array of premiums, co-pays, and coverage limits. The coverage is offered by private companies, not Medicare.

CMS officials said some problems can be attributed to a surge in enrollment in the last few weeks of 2005. Recent enrollees may not have received cards to verify enrollment. Those who only have letters from their insurer must get their coverage verified by pharmacists. “This kind of delay is not much different than what would happen for someone who took a new job and got insurance the day before they went to the pharmacy,” said Pawelec.

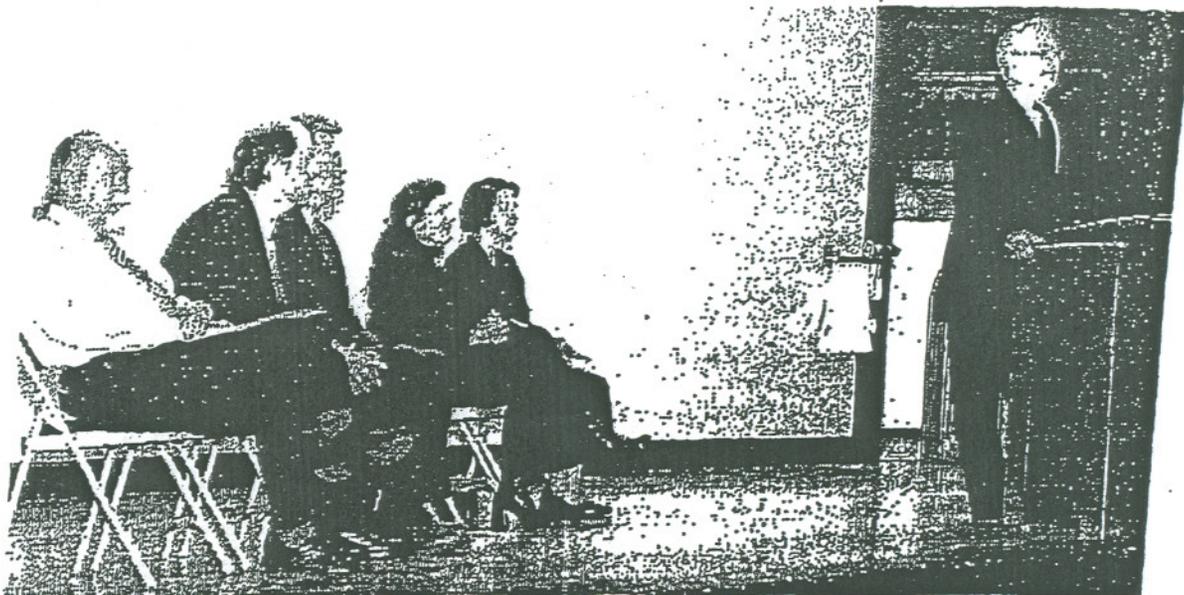
CMS is urging insurance companies to increase capacity of help lines so pharmacists can confirm enrollment faster and to simplify the patient information they send to the government. Yesterday, CMS also held a phone conference with pharmacists to instruct them in filling prescriptions for patients without drug cards.

The steps have not allayed the concerns of some elected officials.

“The implementation of the new Medicare prescription drug benefit has been a disaster,” said Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, in a statement. “Medicaid patients, who are some of the frailest members of society, have been left without the medications they need. Pharmacists have been overwhelmed and overworked – and the administration hasn’t provided them the tools needed to implement the new plan.”

A follow-up call between New England congressional staff and CMS officials is set for next week.

Jeffrey Krasner can be reached at [krasner@globe.com](mailto:krasner@globe.com)



CONGRESSMAN BARNEY FRANK paid a visit to Middleboro Town Hall on Monday night to address the Medicare Bill passed by congress earlier this year. (Gazette Photo by Jane Lopes)

## Cong. Frank . . .

ment would pay \$1,080, and the recipient would be responsible for \$1,920. If the recipient's annual drug costs were \$5,100, which is \$420 per month, the government would pay \$1,080 and the recipient would pay \$4,020. Once the recipient's drug expenses exceed \$5,100, the government picks up a larger share of the cost.

Congressman Frank said some of the other problems with the bill included an "experiment with privatization" of the Medicare system, which is being conducted as part of this bill in six metro-statistical areas. This program would enable private insurers to offer competing bids with Medicare in those six areas. Some argue that this will give seniors more options, while others argue that it will force seniors into managed care plans that they can't afford.

Another issue with the bill is that it continues to ban importing drugs from Canada or other countries.

"The argument that we are given is that drugs in Canada aren't safe, and therefore we can't allow Americans to import them," the congressman said. "My argument is the day I read about a lot of dead Canadians from taking bad pills, I'll believe that."

A third issue the congressman has with the bill is the fact that it will not allow the federal government to negotiate with drug companies in America for lower prices - even though they negotiate with lots of other companies, like airlines, because they buy in bulk.

In defense of the high cost of drugs, drug companies say that costs are so high, not because it costs so much to make the drug, but because they have to compensate themselves for the money they spent on drugs that don't make it to market. Rep. Frank said that while he understands that, he doesn't believe that the cancer patient or the patient with heart disease should

pay for that research. Instead he believes the federal government should provide pharmaceutical companies with subsidies for research, and/or better tax breaks for research.

Before Congressman Frank's Medicare presentation he received recognition from the Middleboro Youth Advocates for his "continuous support for community service for first time offenders." The JAIRUS program, led by Pastor Loren Decker, who also serves on the MYA board, works with first time offenders to help them meet their community service requirements and get their life back on track. Town manager and MYA co-chairman John Healy, who presented the certificate to Mr. Frank, noted that the program is being recognized as a model program, and that the JAIRUS program's director and founder, Pastor Decker, has received numerous requests to expand the program throughout the area and the Cape.

# Cong. Frank blasts Medicare bill at local forum

By VICTORIA  
DeMORANVILLE  
Special Writer

MIDDLEBORO - Speaking at a Democracy in Action forum in the Town Hall auditorium Monday night, Congressman Barney Frank said the Medicare bill recently signed into law by President Bush includes "sweeping changes" and "peculiar provisions." The sweeping changes, the longtime Democrat lawmaker said, include prescription drug coverage, which would go into effect in 2006. Provisions that include a yearly hike in premiums, a deductible, co-pays, and a "donut hole" make the term "coverage" a bit questionable, he asserted.

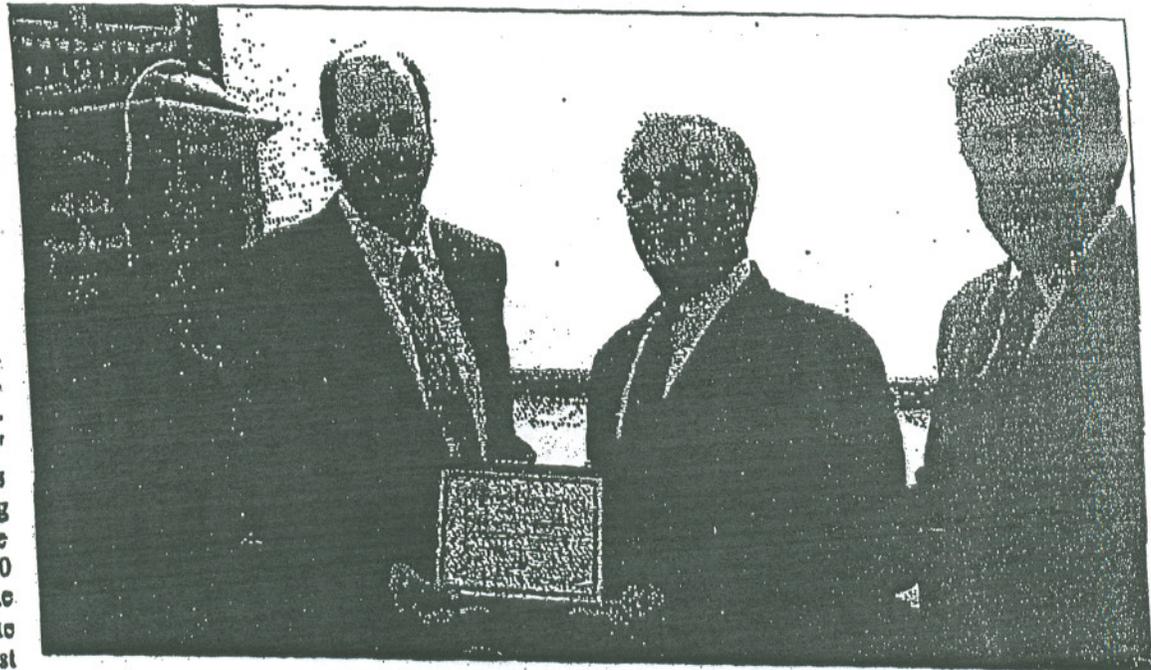
The congressman's visit was hosted by the Democracy in Action Committee, a small group of local citizens who have been sponsoring a forum series at the Middleboro Public Library since

last October. The purpose of the forum is to afford citizens the opportunity to explore recent and controversial domestic and foreign policy issues.

To further his point on problems with Medicare, Rep. Frank said that the way the bill works is that first the Medicare recipient would pay an estimated \$420 yearly premium, then a \$250 deductible, "and then this bill will cover your expenses, 80 percent of your expenses, up to \$2,250 a year." Then the government stops paying until the recipient's drug costs reach \$5,100. The coverage gap between \$2,250 and \$5,100 is being called the "donut hole." It is a way for the government to decrease the cost of the program.

This means that if the Medicare recipient's drug bill was \$3,000 a year, the govern-

(Please continue on page 8)



MIDDLEBORO YOUTH ADVOCACY representatives present a citation to Congressman Barney Frank, second from right, for his support for youth programs, particularly the locally based JAIUS Agency, during a visit to Middleboro Monday night. From left are Tracy Desovich of the Southeast Center for Healthy Communities, who also sits on the JAIUS board, JAIUS director Laren Decker, Congressman Frank, and Middleboro Town Manager John Healey, a member of the MYA board. (Gazette Photo by Jane Lopes)