

Popular SeniorCare Program to Continue

Funding reinstated through 2009

by John G. Sutter RPh

In a surprise move on May 25, Wisconsin U.S. Senators Herb Kohl and Russ Feingold successfully amended the appropriation bill for the federal government's funding of the Iraq war to require the continuation of Wisconsin's popular low-income prescription drug program for seniors. President Bush signed the appropriation bill the following day, extending SeniorCare through 2009 as called for by the budget amendment. The action ended the uncertainty of the program and a busy three to four months of deliberations on the program's future—and the more than 100,000 Wisconsin citizens enrolled in it.

Earlier this year, the Bush Administration had indicated that federal funding of SeniorCare would not continue indefinitely. Federal funding was scheduled to end on June 30, 2007 with the end of the federal waiver that had been granted to initiate the program. Governor Doyle and other state officials had pressed for continuation of the program but the best-case scenario called for continuing the program through the end of 2007. The six-month extension of federal support was contingent upon state officials seriously

developing an alternate wrap-around program, something the feds call a Medicare Savings Program.

Governor Doyle had made a formal announcement about the state's intent to start a wrap-around program, dubbed WisconsinCare, on January 1, 2008. He directed the Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS) to design a program within the structure of Medicare rules and state funding. WisconsinCare was slated to provide payment for a range of recipient Part B and Part D premiums, deductibles, co-insurance and drug costs in the donut hole of Part D.

However, with the recent Congressional action, WisconsinCare has been shelved and SeniorCare will continue as it is currently designed for at least 2½ more years.

PSW joined senior groups and others in lobbying for the continuation of SeniorCare. The program was relatively simple in its design and broad in its appeal. Co-payments in SeniorCare are modest, it is easy for seniors to enroll in the familiar program, pharmacy providers fees have been fair, and the benefit is efficiently administered by the state. Although data was difficult to obtain for SeniorCare and the Medicare Part D plans

for comparison purposes, an AARP analysis showed that SeniorCare was also less expensive than the Part D programs. Now that SeniorCare is going to continue, it will behoove its advocates to have total costs compared between the programs so that the data can be used for the program's future renewal.

SENIORCARE, FIRST-HAND

For the past seven years, I have served as PSW's appointed representative to Wisconsin's SeniorCare advisory committee. My experiences serving on this DHFS advisory committee have given me added insight into policy development and implementation by that department. The advisory committee has representatives from DHFS, the Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups, benefit specialists, industry (PHRMA), AARP, other advocates for seniors and PSW. The committee's charge has been to advise how the department can best administer the program. Our committee contains some very aggressive and effective advocates for seniors and the committee's other constituents. The SeniorCare model showcases a level of cooperation among all the stakeholders to create a straight-forward, efficient benefit for Wisconsin seniors.

It has been PSW's objective from the very beginning to craft SeniorCare as a benefit, not a detriment, to all parties. We have advocated that it be understandable and workable at the pharmacy level. And, while there is always need for continued improvement and modification, SeniorCare has generally met PSW's objectives and the other stakeholders serving in an advisory capacity have learned about the importance of the issues brought forward by those of us in pharmacy.

PSW, and the pharmacy community in general, have contributed significantly toward the success of the SeniorCare program. Program initiatives to manage cost and to ensure desirable therapeutic outcomes have been embraced and accomplished by Wisconsin pharmacists and their staffs. We will continue to offer our ideas, input and challenge as necessary in order to maintain the program in the manner that it has been conceived. ●

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RESOURCES FOR PHARMACISTS AND SENIORS

WisconsinCare	http://WisconsinCare.wi.gov 1-800-657-2038
Medicare Part D	www.medicare.gov 1-800-633-4227
SeniorCare	http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/seniorcare/ 1-800-657-2038
State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP)	www.dhfs.state.wi.us/aging 1-800-242-1060
Social Security Administration	www.ssa.gov 1-800-772-1213
PSW Medicare Toolkit	www.pswi.org/professional/reimbursement/medicare.htm