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U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MAY 3, 2006

Fact Sheet

GAO: Medicare's Communications to Beneficiaries of the Prescription Drug Benefit Could Be Improved

On May 3, 2006, GAO released a report reviewing the quality of CMS communications regarding the new Medicare Part D drug benefit. Specifically, GAO analyzed the content, clarity, and accuracy of the CMS written material on the drug benefit, the CMS 1-800-MEDICARE hotline, and the CMS Medicare.gov drug benefit website.

GAO's Findings

GAO found that there were numerous problems with the information provided by CMS about the complicated new drug benefit: written materials failed to comply with basic guidelines for good communications and were written at an educational level that rendered them unreadable by almost half of all seniors; the Medicare website was poorly designed and was so complicated that seniors were typically able to perform less than half of all simple tasks they attempted on the site; and the 1-800-Medicare hotline provided inaccurate, incomplete, or inappropriate responses to one-third of basic questions. On one key question — which plan offered the lowest costs for individuals taking a given set of drugs — the Medicare hotline provided an incomplete, inappropriate, or inaccurate answer almost 60% of the time.

Overall, GAO concluded that “CMS has not ensured that its communications to beneficiaries and their advisers are provided in a manner that is consistently clear, complete, accurate, and usable. ... [T]heir limitations could result in confusion among those seeking to make coverage decisions.”¹

CMS Written Communications

GAO's review of CMS's written documents describing the Medicare drug benefit found that “the information these documents presented lacked clarity” and “are not completely clear and understandable for many seniors.”² Specifically, GAO found:

- Although 40% of seniors read at or below the fifth-grade level, the reading level of the CMS documentation was at the seventh grade to post-college level.

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- Documents failed to comply with generally recognized guidelines for good communications; for example, they used too much jargon and failed to adequately define difficult terms.
- A focus group of 11 beneficiaries was unable to complete basic tasks — such as computing out-of-pocket costs or determining whether and how to enroll — described by the written documents.

CMS 1-800 Medicare Hotline

GAO made 500 calls to the 1-800 Medicare hotline, asking a series of basic, sample questions about drug benefit enrollment decision for seniors. According to GAO, the investigators “received a substantial number of responses that were inaccurate, incomplete, or inappropriate, and that sometimes involved an extensive wait.”³ This phone survey found:

- On one-third of all calls, beneficiaries either received no answer or received an answer that was incomplete, inaccurate, or inappropriate.
- Five percent of all phone calls made by GAO were unanswered or disconnected by the 1-800-MEDICARE hotline, and 25% required waits of over five minutes.
- On one critical, basic question asked by GAO — which plan offered the lowest costs for individuals with a given list of drugs — CMS operators provided an incomplete, inappropriate, or inaccurate answer on almost 60% of all calls (43% of calls were unanswered or received inappropriate responses; 16% were inaccurate).
- On another basic question — whether an individual qualified for extra financial assistance under the benefit — CMS operators provided an incomplete or inaccurate response on 10% of calls.

The Medicare.gov Website

GAO also reviewed the Medicare.gov drug benefit website, finding that “it can be difficult to use.”⁴ The report found:

- Seniors in a focus group compiled by GAO were unable to complete simple tasks using the website — such as obtaining information on enrollment and costs of the drug benefit — resulting in an overall usability score of only 47 out of 100.
- Younger website users were able to complete only 53% of tasks.

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- Basic design aspects of the website were inadequate or overly complicated to use. For example, forms that collect on-line information were difficult to correct, and key functions of the website — such as “continue” and “choose a drug plan” buttons — were often not visible on the page without scrolling down.
- Two key requirements that the website be accessible for people with disabilities were not met, making it difficult for the visually impaired to use.

¹ GAO, *Medicare: Communications to Beneficiaries on the Prescription Drug Benefit Could Be Improved*, at 8 (May 2006) (GAO-06-654).

² *Id.*, at 5.

³ *Id.*, at 6.

⁴ *Id.*, at 7.