

SENATOR JOE BIDEN ON MEDICARE

“Politicians need to understand what it’s like for people on Medicare, who are lying in bed staring at a ceiling wondering if they are going to be able to pay the bills. We need to understand their concerns and aspirations if we are going to reshape Medicare in the 21st Century.” – Senator Joe Biden

THE BIDEN PLAN: RESHAPING MEDICARE FOR THE 21st CENTURY

Strengthening the Medicare Part D Prescription Drug Program: Senator Biden fought for years to expand the Medicare program to cover prescription drugs with a plan that would provide valuable coverage, be easy to use, and be affordable to most seniors. The present plan is complicated and has not done enough to keep drug costs down. Senator Biden supports improving Medicare’s prescription drug program by:

- Allowing the federal government to directly negotiate drug prices with pharmaceutical companies, which could help lower drug prices for consumers.
- Eliminating the benefit gap in coverage, otherwise known as the “donut hole.”
- Speeding up availability of generic drugs.

Encouraging Prevention and Modernization: Right now, one of the largest causes of rising Medicare costs is the treatment of patients with chronic diseases. It is estimated that 96 cents of every dollar spent in Medicare is used on patients with chronic diseases like diabetes, hypertension, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, osteoarthritis and heart disease. It is also important to include advancements in medical technology in the Medicare program to improve the ability of providers to deliver the best care possible. Senator Biden wants to bring health care costs under control and increase the quality of care by:

- Placing a greater emphasis on prevention and wellness in the Medicare program; a provision in the recently enacted Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act that provides coverage for new preventive services recommended by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force is a great start.
- Waiving copayment requirements under Medicare for screenings for cervical, breast and colon cancer, as well as other high cost chronic diseases.
- Establishing a Comparative Effectiveness Panel to evaluate treatment protocols, medical devices and new technology, and establish best practices for management of chronic diseases.
- Increasing federal support for the development of electronic medical records and providing incentives for providers to adapt such technology.

Securing Access to Health Care Providers: Senator Biden wants to stabilize the way Medicare determines rates it pays physicians and other providers. Currently, a methodology known as the sustainable growth rate (SGR) formula establishes annual payments rates—with recommended reductions each of the last several years. Because certain payment cuts could cause providers to stop seeing Medicare patients, Senator Biden has voted to prevent these cuts from taking place, including voting this past July to override President Bush’s veto of the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act of 2008 to halt a 10 percent cut. Instead of having to prevent these cuts from taking place every year, Senator Biden urges the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission to recommend a new methodology to replace the SGR formula—one that will more fully take into account medical inflation and other changes in costs of providing physicians’ services.

Ensuring Equitable Cost Sharing of Mental Health Services: Senator Biden has long supported treating mental health services the same as other health services and was pleased the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act of 2008 included a measure he had cosponsored to ensure that copayments for mental health services under Medicare are on par with cost sharing for other medical and surgical disorders.

THE BIDEN RECORD: PROTECTION AND PREVENTION

Promoting Breast Cancer Screening: Senator Biden helped lead the effort to require Medicare to cover annual mammograms for women over the age of 65, and to exempt these procedures from the annual Medicare Part B deductible. He also cosponsored the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program Reauthorization Act, which encourages examinations and screenings for breast and cervical cancer.

Ensuring Providers Are Available to Medicare Patients: Senator Biden has consistently fought to ensure an adequate supply of physicians and other Medicare providers for our nation's seniors by opposing arbitrary caps on reimbursement and working to reform the provider payment system. He recently voted for the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act to prevent a 10 percent cut in physician payments from taking place. The Senator also has worked to preserve Medicare payments for the indirect costs of educating new health care providers borne by teaching hospitals like Christiana Care, as many of these facilities provide crucial care to Medicare beneficiaries.

Opposing Arbitrary Limits on Services: To ensure Medicare beneficiaries received proper treatment, Senator Biden has worked to prevent arbitrary monetary limits on Medicare coverage of physical, occupational, and speech therapy services. He is a cosponsor of the Medicare Access to Rehabilitation Services Act that would eliminate the coverage limits listed above and voted to override the President's veto of the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act, which extended the existing exceptions process for therapy limits through December 31, 2009.

Protecting Against Genetic Non-Discrimination: Senator Biden was a long-time cosponsor of recently enacted legislation that prohibits an issuer of a Medicare supplemental policy from seeking or using genetic testing to determine coverage or set rates.

Fighting Against Fraud and Abuse: Senator Biden has backed numerous efforts to eliminate fraud and abuse in the administration of Medicare in order to reduce the cost of Medicare for taxpayers. He has also supported measures to protect vulnerable seniors from abuse at the hands of their care givers and has opposed Social Security numbers being used as patient identification numbers in the Medicare program to prevent identification theft and financial fraud.

Allowing Medicare Patients to Participate in Clinical Trials: Senator Biden worked hard to ensure Medicare recipients are able to participate in groundbreaking medical studies on new treatments and medications. He also supported numerous efforts to increase the budget for the National Cancer Institute, which would allow more clinical trials to take place.

Preserving Medicare for Retirees: When the future of Medicare came under budgetary attack and was threatened with its gradual demise, Senator Biden stood steadfast in defense of Medicare and opposed attempts to cut the program and jeopardize health insurance coverage for our nation's seniors.