

Kathy Greenlee
Assistant Secretary for Aging
Remarks at the Volunteer Recognition Awards Ceremony
2009 SMP Conference “Embracing Excellence”
August 19, 2009
Washington, D.C.

Thank you, Barbara (Dieker), for your introduction and for the hard work you have put into making this conference a success.

It was good to see all of you briefly yesterday. My goodness, the room was packed. Isn't it fun to be popular? I am very pleased Secretary Sebelius was here to talk to us about Medicare, fraud and the importance of educating seniors. She values your work and so do I. The attention we all received yesterday was well-timed and well-deserved.

As I mentioned in my introduction, the Secretary had always understood the critical value of providing information and education to consumers, and especially to seniors. Seniors need good information about their health care benefits. And volunteers are the backbone of providing that education.

When I joined the Kansas Department on Aging as Secretary, I then learned about another equally important program – this one – the SMP program. Although, I still tend to think of it as Senior Medicare Patrol. I understand the value of having a one-on-one conversation with seniors about Medicare. Both how Medicare works and how seniors with Medicare are targets for fraud.

I began my career in state government working in the Attorney General's office on telemarketing and mail scams aimed at seniors. Seniors are targeted because they have money. Criminals look for seniors and try to part them from their nest egg. But, as you know, even seniors with limited financial resources are at risk because their Medicare number is the ticket to a stream of money. Seniors are the target, and taxpayers are the victim.

You, the volunteers and staff, are the first line of defense. I am pleased to join you today at this Volunteer Recognition Awards Ceremony.

Since this program began in 1997, SMPs have:

1. Held more than one million one-on-one counseling sessions. And, thankfully, not all of those sessions are presented in English. Man Ping Zhou (Chinese), Romolo “Mo” Pellacani (Chamorro, the language of indigenous people from Guam) and Marisabel Simson (Spanish) are three volunteers who exemplify why and how it is important to reach all seniors and talk to them in a language they understand. They represent all of us who honor the diversity of this country.
2. Educated over 2.6 million beneficiaries by conducting over 67,000 group education sessions. Dick Hilton held twice monthly “birthday clinics” for new to Medicare beneficiaries. And Ruth Candeub Avins spends a lot of time hanging out in senior facilities and with seniors groups talking about the SMP program.
3. In addition to group sessions, close to 22 million people have been reached through 63,000 community education events. For example, Charles Clark will drive or fly anywhere in Hawaii to give presentations. I know Charles can’t be here with us today. I suspect a lot of us are willing to fly around Hawaii with him.

And who knows how many people Betty Stambolian has reached. Her peers in Vermont brag about the outreach materials she has developed, including a public service announcement for the SMP program.

4. Since 1997, over 108,500 complaints from beneficiaries or on their behalf were resolved or referred for further investigation. I’m wondering if maybe 100,000 of these complaints were resolved by Joanna Gibson. Apparently Ms. Gibson isn’t afraid of a good Medicare appeal. And, it seems Dottie Beauregard can get enrollment problems resolved while en route to a vacation. (This worries me, because you all make it look like even volunteers don’t get vacations.)
5. As a result of all of this hard work, almost \$106 million in Medicare and Medicaid funds recovered, beneficiary savings and

other savings have been attributed to the SMP program. And, Terri Ivers, I understand you even put your personal doctors on alert that you are a long-standing SMP volunteer and you'll be checking your bills carefully.

Another reason for the success of the SMP program is our partnership at the local, state, tribal and federal level with law enforcement; the national aging services network; CMS; as well as other community, faith-based and health care organizations.

Currently there are 54 SMP projects in 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The SMP programs across the country can also be seen in the larger context of civic engagement. Civic engagement is a hot topic right now. The President has demonstrated his commitment to service and civic engagement was a major topic when I met recently with two top officials from AARP.

Volunteers have historically served at every level and delivered all types of services within the Aging Network. In order to provide support and services to ever increasing number of senior Americans, all of us need to pitch in and more people need to volunteer. We simply need the help.

I was impressed in reading biographical information about our volunteer award winners. Truly, these individuals have donated thousands of hours of their own time to helping inform and educate others – most especially their peers, other seniors. What we all know, also, is that this fine group is the tip of the iceberg. Throughout our communities and our nations, thousands upon thousands of volunteers give their time and precious talents to help others.

As we watch the baby boomers age, we must see the opportunities that generation represents. They are not the silver tsunami – a word I personally dislike. They are a wave of help and wave of hope. This new volunteer pool will be the largest, healthiest, best-educated older Americans in U.S. history.

Personally, I can't wait to watch. I'm one of those boomers at the tail end. And I am watching today's volunteers and tomorrow's volunteers with one thought in mind. You are my heroes. You stay involved. You keep your minds sharp. (And I know you're also supposed to be eating right and exercising.)

You are the examples – the current day face – of active aging. It's obvious you care deeply about our country, its future and future generations.

I admire and applaud you. Thank you for your service and your tremendous example of embracing excellence as you age.