

SMP Coordinator Tells Congress of Program's Importance

By Nancy Aldrich and Bill Benson

Health Benefits ABCs

Bettie Hughes, SMP coordinator for the Senior Alliance, Area Agency on Aging 1-C, Wayne County, Mich., spoke at a March 26 Senate Special Committee on Aging hearing on preventing Medicare fraud. Hughes is also with the SHIP, the Michigan Medicare/Medicaid Assistance Program, which has the contract with the SMP.

"I was very excited to be there," she told *The Sentinel*. "I think you could tell from my tone that this is definitely a passion of mine. I am a true advocate when it comes to seniors and I want to make sure that they are protected and are aware and empowered and able to stand up for themselves."

Among Hughes' recommendations to the Senate committee were:

- Find better ways to identify fraudsters and prevent them from marketing their schemes to vulnerable seniors
- Find a way to all work together – government and private industry, beneficiary and provider – to stop Medicare fraud
- Give the Medicare program better tools to fight health care fraud
- Crack down on abusive marketing practices

Hughes said her SMP has worked with SHIP counselors to reach many beneficiaries. They have also worked

with the Office of Inspector General (OIG) to teach service coordinators working in government housing how to protect the residents of their buildings from health care fraud.

Cases, Hughes told the committee, included ones in which companies billed for services not delivered and for services not only unnecessary but harmful. She also described a case in which a company provided gifts in exchange for a person's personal identification information.

She also told the committee about the Medicare and Medicaid savings attributed to the SMP program.

In another case, an elderly man was billed for outpatient physical therapy (PT) while he was having triple bypass surgery

following a heart attack. The man had begun the PT before the heart attack but never completed the program. Medicare was billed for 12 visits he never received. When the family shared the Medicare Summary Notice with Hughes, she suggested that the family talk with the provider. The provider responded that it was impossible to change the charges. The SMP reported the information to the OIG, and the PT clinic was later closed.



Bettie Hughes testifies at a Congressional hearing March 26. To view and read the testimonies of her and others, go to: <http://www.aging.senate.gov/hearings/preventing-medicare-fraud-how-can-we-best-protect-seniors-and-taxpayers>.

Another Medicare beneficiary, Patricia Gresko, who appeared at the hearing with Hughes, described how a doctor treated her for an “immune system problem” while in remission from cancer. She had a bad reaction to the treatment, but rather than stopping the IV drip, the doctor slowed it down so it lasted seven hours. He continued those treatments one day a month for seven months. Gresko was unaware there was a problem until she later heard that the doctor had been arrested and taken into custody for Medicare fraud. “The newspapers said he had diagnosed people with cancer who didn’t have it, just so he could bill Medicare for the treatments,” she said. Other specialists told Gresko she should not have received the treatments. “Over the course of seven months, I had paid this doctor over \$1,500 in co-pays. I later found out he had received over \$14,000 for giving me these treatments,” Gresko said.

Hughes also referred to other cases where seniors, or the facilities in which they live, have been offered gifts of televisions and video games, weekly pizza parties, and bingo games. In one case, a home health representative followed a volunteer driver on a Meals on Wheels route, recorded the address, and later returned to that beneficiary’s home with baskets of food, saying it was a gift from Medicare.

Unfortunately, in the cases involving gifts, the SMP doesn’t find out about it until an SMP presenter goes to a senior housing building and hears stories from some of the residents, Hughes told *The Sentinel*. She noted that the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires housing service coordinators to invite educational presentations for the residents. Hughes said HUD should partner with SMPs to ensure that there is a gatekeeper to protect residents from unscrupulous presenters. A presenter may offer to provide a 60-inch flat screen TV for a common room for the building. “But nothing is ever free,” Hughes said. “Somebody needs to question this and find out what is going on. In fact, many of these people are getting residents’ personal identification numbers and then billing Medicare for home health care. Or the fraudster may just be in the building doing some vacuuming, but they get a resident’s Medicare number and bill for home health care.”

Hughes also noted that most of these residents are not “homebound” and do not even meet the qualifications for home health care. 🟡

SMP Tip Sheet for Senior Center and Senior Housing Staff

Senior center and senior housing staff are in a unique position to help protect their clients from unscrupulous individuals wanting access to potentially vulnerable older adults. SMP outreach to these staff has proven highly effective in Michigan and many other states. A tip sheet from The Center is available in the SMP Resource Library to help with SMP outreach to these partners. Titled “Protecting Seniors from Health Care Fraud in Community Settings,” it

describes common health care scams, gives tips for screening speakers or groups that want to provide on-site information or services, and offers guidance for inviting outside speakers. It is available in English and Spanish. Search by keyword or find it using an advanced search. For example, select “Tip Sheet” as the type and “Center” as the origin.