



Senator Maria Cantwell

Working For Washington's Seniors

Dear Friend,

I would like to take a moment to update you on some important issues of concern to seniors. As you may know, the Senate recently passed a bill that will provide a prescription drug benefit for Medicare beneficiaries.

The bill is not perfect, but I voted for it because I believe it is a good first step toward providing seniors with access to affordable prescription drugs. The bill also included \$33 billion for rural health providers across the country, including increases in Medicare reimbursements for rural hospitals, physicians, and home health agencies. Also, I was able to make an important change to the bill that will prevent the private companies providing the new benefit from making huge profits at the expense of the nation's 40 million seniors and other consumers. I'll tell you more about the bill in this newsletter.

The prescription drug bill has received a lot of coverage in the press, but there are some other key issues that you may not have heard about. I've written this newsletter to let you know what I've been doing on these subjects.

I am grateful to those of you who have shared your views on these and other issues with me. As always, I welcome your thoughts, and I encourage you to write or email me.

Best wishes,

Maria Cantwell

Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit

I hear regularly from Washington's senior citizens about the high cost of prescription drugs. While seniors in our state, like elsewhere in the country, want a Medicare prescription drug benefit, they also desperately want some relief from high prescription drug prices. They tell me: "Stop the price gouging. Do something to make sure that prescription drugs are reasonably affordable for everyone."

That's why I am so committed to providing a prescription drug benefit as part of Medicare. The bill that the Senate just passed isn't perfect, but I voted for it because I believe it is a good first step toward providing seniors with access to affordable prescription drugs. The bill also helps cash-strapped rural health

providers across the country by providing a \$33 billion increase in Medicare reimbursements for rural hospitals, physicians, and home health agencies.

Perhaps most importantly, I was able to change the bill to prevent the private companies providing the new benefit from making huge profits at the expense of the nation's 40 million seniors and other consumers. My amendment provides greater oversight of pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs), the companies that control the purchase of most prescription drugs in the United States.

Pharmacy benefit managers have been the target of numerous lawsuits filed in recent years by health plans and employers, as well as the federal and state governments. The allegations in these lawsuits are always the same: over-inflated drug prices, price collusion between PBMs and manufacturers, failure of

PBMs to share discounts and rebates, and switching patients to more expensive drugs without the consent of the patient or the doctor.

My amendment provides greater oversight of cost savings to seniors by requiring PBMs to disclose their financial arrangements to antitrust regulators to make certain that there is no price fixing occurring between PBMs and drug companies. It also prohibits a pharmaceutical company from owning a pharmacy benefit manager, an inherent conflict of interest. These steps will prevent collusion on pricing and help ensure seniors are not paying unnecessarily high prices for their medications.

Although I was able to improve the bill before it passed, there's more work to do. Conferees representing the Senate and the House of Representatives are meeting now to resolve differences between the two bills passed by each chamber. This is an important opportunity to address serious deficiencies in the House bill. Also, before the legislation takes effect in 2006, I think we should add provisions to close the coverage gap for seniors with particularly high prescription drug expenses, and to ensure that seniors who live in rural areas have the same choices as those who live in urban areas. In addition, I am concerned that changes to the way Medicare pays for drugs administered in physician offices – especially for cancer patients and others receiving IV therapy – will unduly affect how physicians are able to continue providing this necessary care. Even though the full Senate will now shift its attention to other legislation, know that providing seniors with a comprehensive and meaningful prescription drug benefit remains a high priority for me.

Long-Term Care

Perhaps one of the most pressing issues affecting seniors and their families is long-term care. Our increased life spans and the aging of the baby boomer generation mean that more and more people are caring for their parents or other older family members. In fact, about 37 million Americans provide informal or unpaid care to a family member.



Caring for a parent or relative can be a financial burden for many families. Caregiving medical costs – excluding non-economic costs – average about \$2,000 a year, and more than forty percent of those costs are currently paid for out-of-pocket. Medical costs alone for people with two or more chronic conditions and activity limitations average more than \$5,500. All of this adds up: nationally, family caregivers provide about \$250 billion

in continuous unpaid care to their loved ones.

I joined with Senator Barbara Mikulski in her amendment to the fiscal year 2004 budget resolution that would have provided a \$5,000 tax credit for family caregivers. The tax credit would have helped cover costs of respite care, adult day care, and prescription drugs. Unfortunately, the amendment failed 45-54. I will continue to work on this issue until we come up with a solution that provides real help for families who face this dilemma.

Free and Discounted Services for Seniors

I regularly meet with a broad range of groups who represent seniors. The debate over a prescription drug benefit has underscored a fundamental problem with our health care system – the rising cost not just of prescription drugs, but also of other important health care services. Recently, several groups have shared with me helpful information about benefits at free or discounted rates to help seniors cope with these escalating costs. I pass these along in the hope that they can be of help to you and your family.

- **Benefits information.** Many seniors are eligible for benefits, but don't receive them simply because they aren't aware of them or don't know they qualify. A unique web site, <http://www.benefitscheckup.org>, addresses this problem by allowing seniors and their families to find information on a wide array of benefits. The site covers much more than just health benefits; users can also find out whether they qualify for help paying their energy bills or for a family caregiver, for example.

The National Council on Aging, a national non-profit that has been helping seniors since 1950, administers the site. In Washington state, the service is also supported by the generous assistance of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

- **Prescription drug assistance.** The Lupus Foundation of America recently told me about an exciting non-profit group called the Medicine Program. This group, established and run by volunteers, helps seniors without prescription drug coverage obtain discounted medicine. Specifically, it helps people who lack insurance coverage for outpatient drugs, do not qualify for a government program such as Medicaid, and who have difficulty affording prescription drugs at retail prices. The Medicine Program isn't just for seniors – it's available to people of any age who meet these criteria. For more information, please visit the web site, <http://www.themedicineprogram.com/>, or call the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the Lupus Foundation at (206) 546-6785 in the Seattle area, or toll-free at (877) 774-2992.

- **Free eye check-ups and care.** Through its Seniors EyeCare program, the American Academy of Ophthalmology provides free yearly eye check-ups to seniors who have not seen an eye doctor in three or more years, and who do not have eye care insurance through an HMO or the VA. Eligible seniors receive a free exam, and up to one year of treatment – at no cost – for any condition diagnosed during the initial visit. The group also sponsors free glaucoma screenings. For more information, call toll-free at (800) 222-EYES, or visit the web site at <http://www.eyecareamerica.org>.

Military Retirees – Concurrent Receipt

I am pleased to report that last month the Senate unanimously passed legislation to provide full concurrent receipt benefits to our nation's disabled retired veterans. This legislation will reform the current policy that unfairly merges two distinct programs and forces many disabled military retirees to forfeit a significant portion of their well-deserved retirement pay.

I have been a long supporter and co-sponsor of this legislation, which is very important to Washington state. More than one out of ten Washingtonians is a veteran, and our state ranks twelfth in the country in veterans population per capita. Last fall, I released a report that found that full concurrent receipt would bring approximately \$135 million annually to an estimated 26,300 veterans in Washington state.

Identity Theft

Seniors should be aware of a growing type of crime: identity theft. When criminals learn personal information such as your Social Security number or other unique identifying information, they can maliciously use it to apply for credit cards and other documents in your name. Victims of identity theft can have their credit rating ruined as a result. In 2001, there were over 500,000 new victims of identity theft.

Although Washington state has passed a law to help victims of identity theft, it is also a national problem. That is why I am introducing legislation that recognizes that we need a national process to help victims of identity theft restore their good name and good credit. I introduced a similar measure last year. My bill had bipartisan support, and passed the Senate. Unfortunately, it was held up in the House. This year, I'll work to see that the bill passes both houses of Congress and is signed into law.



Do-Not-Call List

Earlier this spring, President Bush signed the Do-Not-Call Implementation Act into law. I strongly supported this bill, and worked in the Senate to ensure it applies to all telephone solicitors. The law allows consumers to opt out of receiving unwanted telephone solicitations from anywhere in the nation by signing up to just one national list. It also prohibits telemarketers from calling those telephone numbers listed on the registry. Beginning in October, it will be illegal for telemarketers to call any number listed on the national registry.

The Federal Trade Commission, the Federal Communications Commission, and the states will begin enforcing the National Do Not Call Registry on October 1, 2003, for consumers who register by August 31. You

can add your name to the list in one of two ways: over the Internet or by telephone. Washington state residents can register toll-free by phone by calling 1-888-382-1222. To register online, please visit this web site: <http://donotcall.gov/>. For more information, please visit the FTC's web site, at <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/conline/edcams/donotcall/index.html>.

Working for You

Earlier this year, I received an email from Timothy Howell, who was having a problem obtaining his benefits from the Social Security Administration (SSA). In August 2002, Mr. Howell had been declared permanently disabled. SSA, however, failed to issue his benefits. Since he then could not afford his insurance, his insurer threatened to cancel his policy. At the time, Mrs. Howell was unemployed and they had no monthly income.

When they contacted the SSA, the Howells were told that it would be six months before the problem



could be rectified. After Mr. Howell contacted my office, my staff researched the issue and followed up with the SSA. Less than two months after contacting me, Mr. Howell received a check for the full amount of his retroactive benefits. If you or a family member are not receiving your full benefits, please let me know.

To contact me by U.S. Mail: 717 Hart Office Building / Washington, DC 20510
e-mail: <http://cantwell.senate.gov/contact/> *To get service help: <http://cantwell.senate.gov/services/>*
To subscribe to my weekly email update: <http://gp1d.senate.gov/mailman/listinfo/cantwell-weekly-update>

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