

NEWS from the North Dakota Department of Human Services
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North Dakota Medicaid prepares for Medicare Part D implementation

BISMARCK, N.D. – For North Dakota Medicaid clients who also qualify for Medicare, the transition to the new Medicare prescription drug program (Part D) is four days away. Beginning January 1, 2006, Medicare, not Medicaid, will pay for their prescriptions. Many people are working behind the scenes to make sure that the coverage change goes as smoothly as possible for the approximately 10,400 people who are “dually eligible” for both Medicare and Medicaid.

The N.D. Department of Human Services, the N.D. Insurance Commissioner’s Office, county social service offices, regional human service centers, long-term care facilities, pharmacies, and other providers are exerting an extra effort to help dually eligible individuals.

Their advice to affected Medicaid clients and guardians is the same as it is for others who qualify for Medicare’s prescription drug plan: they should make sure they are signed up for a plan that meets their needs. The federal government randomly assigned dually eligible individuals to drug plans. If the assigned plan doesn’t cover an individual’s medications or isn’t available at his or her preferred pharmacy, an individual can and should change Medicare drug plans. Medicaid clients can change plans monthly, if needed.

Implementation efforts in the state began over a year ago with presentations and training, and intensified this fall as the transition date approached. In October, North Dakota became the first state to reach a critical implementation milestone by maintaining an error-free data file that correctly matched dually eligible individuals. Since enrollment began on November 15, 2005, efforts have shifted to face-to-face enrollment assistance.

“I cannot thank the pharmacists of this state enough, the nursing homes, or the other organizations that serve Medicaid clients,” said Department of Human Services Executive Director Carol K. Olson. “They are making a tremendous effort to ensure that people who qualify for both Medicare and Medicaid, their families, and guardians understand that a change is coming and that they need to review the plan the federal government assigned them to and possibly change plans to meet their needs.”

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Approximately 10 percent (or about 10,400) of the North Dakotans who qualify for the new Medicare prescription drug benefit also qualify for Medicaid. About 7,000 of them pick up medications monthly, and almost half reside in nursing homes. State Medicaid officials have been working closely with pharmacists, long-term care facilities, and other providers so that they know the assigned plans for Medicaid clients and can offer further help, if necessary.

Shelly Peterson, president of the North Dakota Long Term Care Association, said nursing home employees have been working overtime. “They have been contacting families and working diligently with patients and families to help them understand the options available to them and to help them enroll in an appropriate Medicare drug plan. A lot of this work happens after 5 p.m. and on weekends when we can reach family members.”

“It has been a challenge, but we are very pleased with what has been accomplished in such a short amount of time,” she said.

Human services department employees based at the eight regional human service centers have also been providing enrollment help. They serve the elderly as well as dually eligible individuals who have chronic mental illnesses or other disabling conditions.

Lynden Ring, the extended care treatment unit director at West Central Human Service Center in Bismarck, described their efforts. “The people we serve typically need help understanding that this is legitimate. They also have concerns about how much it is going to cost them,” Ring said. “We’ve all attended training and are contacting clients, explaining the coverage change, and helping them review and select their best options. We can’t make the decision for people, but we help them select a plan or change plans if appropriate. The whole process usually takes between 30 minutes to an hour.”

County social service offices are also offering assistance to affected Medicaid clients. Hettinger County Social Service Office is an example of the proactive efforts underway in rural areas.

Medicare prescription drug plan enrollment assistance is available. For information and assistance, Medicaid clients should contact the federal Medicare program at 1-800-633-4227, or the North Dakota Insurance Department at 1-888-575-6611. Pharmacists and providers may also offer enrollment assistance.

Medicare is the federal health coverage program that serves people age 65 and older or those with qualifying disabilities. Medicaid is the state and federally funded health coverage program for qualifying low-income individuals.

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