

# FRIDAY ALERT



**Alliance for Retired Americans**

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## Medicare Bill to Help Seniors Falls One Vote Short in Senate

In the Senate on Thursday night, supporters of H.R. 6331, the “Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act of 2008,” fell one vote short of the 60 needed to close debate and bring the measure up for a vote. On Tuesday, the U.S. House had voted 355-59 in favor of the bill, which would have helped more seniors qualify for help paying Medicare premiums by fixing the current personal assets test. In addition, the bill would have stopped scheduled payment cuts to doctors who treat Medicare patients and improved Medicare’s preventive benefits, by eliminating several co-payments and bringing mental health parity to Medicare benefits. The final vote was 58-40, with Senate Majority Leader **Harry Reid** (NV) changing his vote to “No” to preserve the right to bring up the legislation again later. Senators **Mitch McConnell** (KY), **Arlen Specter** (PA) and **John Sununu** (NH) were among the 40 Senators whose vote would have made all the difference in reaching cloture. The complete results of the Senate vote are available at [http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\\_call\\_lists/roll\\_call\\_vote\\_cfm.cfm?congress=110&session=2&vote=00160](http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=110&session=2&vote=00160). Alliance members sent more than 3,400 letters to Congress urging passage of the bill. “Once again, Alliance members came through in the clutch,” said **George J. Kourpias**, President of the Alliance. “Our members were heard loud and clear: ‘We will not settle for a compromise that leaves seniors out. Senators who voted wrong cannot say no one spoke up.’” Congress could take up the issue again after the July 4 recess and pass legislation that retroactively restores the physician fee cut. However, such a move would disrupt the payments to physicians. Complete results of the House vote are available at <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2008/roll443.xml>.

## GAO Report on Medicare Advantage Waste is Released

A Government Accountability Office (GAO) report released Wednesday by House Ways and Means Health Subcommittee Chairman **Pete Stark** (D-CA) found that the private insurance companies administering these plans have spent less than projected on beneficiaries, while raking in an extra \$1.4 billion on top of their \$35 billion in profits. The GAO examined plans representing 78% of MA enrollees, and found the programs only spent 85.7% of their total revenue on medical expenses in 2005, significantly below their projection of 90.2%. “Private plans in Medicare spend even less on medical care than they report - to the tune of over a billion dollars in one year alone,” said Stark. “These funds go directly into the pockets of big insurance companies, not toward medical care for beneficiaries.” Added **Ruben Burks**, Secretary Treasurer of the Alliance, “This report provides hard evidence of what we have said all along – these plans cost more to deliver less than traditional Medicare.”

## Settlement Shortens Wait Times for Low-Income Medicare Beneficiaries

Medicare officials promised to expedite prescription drug assistance for low-income beneficiaries, as part of a proposed settlement filed last week with the U.S. District Court in San Francisco. The

agreement resulted from a class-action lawsuit filed on behalf of hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries across the country who have had trouble obtaining medication under the 2003 Medicare law that provided additional financial help for more than six million people eligible for both Medicaid and Medicare. While maximum co-payments for most seniors with income below \$10,400 per year should be \$1.05 for preferred name-brand or generic drugs and \$3.10 for other prescriptions, beneficiaries have frequently been charged \$30 to \$75 and more, because low-income status was not properly shared among state and federal agencies, insurance companies and pharmacies. Many patients were denied their prescriptions by pharmacies, causing numerous states to declare public health emergencies and cover medications for which Medicare should have paid. Under the settlement, if a beneficiary's low-income status is questioned, federal officials must immediately contact state agencies to see whether the person had been enrolled in Medicaid.

### **Rhode Island Alliance HealthLink Wellness Health Fair Helps Hundreds**

On Monday, the Rhode Island Alliance for Retired Americans, led by **John Pernorio**, hosted its HealthLink Wellness Health Fair in West Warwick, Rhode Island. Doctors saw more than 265 visitors, who were screened for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, oral cancer, prostate cancer, and other health issues. **Rep. Patrick Kennedy** (D-RI) and Alliance Executive Director **Edward Coyle** attended. "Prevention and early detection keeps patients healthy and out of hospitals," said Coyle. "This wellness program provided a great public health service."

### **Nevada Protests Sen. McCain, Welcomes President Kourpias**

When Sen. **John McCain** arrived at the University of Nevada Las Vegas for a speech on Wednesday, Nevada Alliance Vice President **Len Vizzaccero** and members of the Nevada Alliance were on hand, along with 65-70 other protesters, to greet him. They protested Sen. McCain's proposal for Social Security privatization - the same **George W. Bush** privatization plan rejected by the American people in 2005. The next day, also in Las Vegas, Alliance President **Kourpias** addressed the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR).

### **The Alliance's Seidman Prize Awarded to National Labor College Student**

The Alliance for Retired Americans Educational Fund announced that **Pamela Fero**, a National Labor College (NLC) student and National Air Traffic Controllers Association member from Lauderhill, Florida has received this year's **Bert and Annabel Seidman** Prize for Advancing Social Policy. Fero won for her research paper, *Winning The Game: What Unions Can Do To Help Women Plan For Retirement*. The prize, awarded to an NLC student who displays great interest in the aging field and in social justice, gives the recipient \$3,000 to help further his or her work in those areas. "Bert and Annabel Seidman were deeply committed to helping workers and retirees with the important issues affecting their lives," said **George Kourpias**, Alliance Educational Fund president. "In her essay Pamela Fero shows the same commitment to serving the retired community."

Editor's note: Due to the Fourth of July holiday, the next *Friday Alert* will be published on July 3.