

SHIPs and Advocacy: Delivering the Message to Congress

Background: The largest expansion of Medicare since its inception in 1965 occurred in 2005. With the chaos and confusion that came with the implementation of the new prescription drug benefit (Part D), many beneficiaries did not know where to turn for help. Part D implementation was accompanied by a proliferation of new Medicare Advantage plans which also added to the complexity of the Medicare program. The valuable and tireless efforts of SHIPs and their volunteers helped millions navigate Medicare Part D and Medicare Advantage decision and enrollment processes.

As beneficiaries continue to seek assistance, it is now more important than ever that SHIPs are sufficiently funded. The SHIP enabling statute allows SHIPs to educate Congress about the tremendous value of their services: *“Such programs shall make recommendations concerning consumer issues and complaints related to the provision of health care to agencies and departments of the State government and the Federal Government responsible for providing or regulating health insurance.”* Excerpts from the SHIP enabling statute are available at: <http://www.hapnetwork.org/assets/pdfs/ship-statute-excerpt.pdf>.

Below are answers to common questions about how SHIPs can advocate for increased funding to support their work.

Q: Who is responsible for funding SHIPs?

A: Both Congress and CMS are responsible for SHIP funding. Each year Congress appropriates funds to operate the federal government. The money appropriated to CMS through the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations process is for a range of health-related programs including Medicare. CMS then allocates funds to SHIPs. It is critically important that SHIPs convey their budgetary needs to their Congressional delegation because, through report language that accompanies the Appropriations Act, Congress can encourage CMS to increase SHIP funding.

Q: What familiarity do Members of Congress have with SHIPs?

A: While some Senators and Representatives are familiar with the work of SHIPs, many members have little or no idea of the range of services provided. SHIPs' most important role in advocating on Capitol Hill is as educators. Informing your state's delegation on the vital role that SHIPs play is your best chance to ensure that they fight for necessary funding for the SHIP program.

Q: How do I communicate with my Senators or Representative?

A: Schedule a telephone call or a face-to-face meeting with both your Senators and Representatives in their Washington D.C. local offices. If necessary, work through the appropriate process as required by your state before contacting members of Congress. If you are not able to speak directly with a member, you can always communicate with a chief of staff or health care legislative assistant.

Q: How can my volunteers help?

A: As private citizens, volunteers can be a persuasive voice for advocating for additional resources. Volunteers may contact their Senators and Representatives to talk about the important work of SHIP.

Q: What is the most important thing to get across in my communication with Congress?

A: The most important point you can make with your members or their staff is the nature of your work and, in particular, the amount of work you have done following the implementation of Part D and the increase in numbers of Medicare Advantage plans. In the past several years, Congressional offices have been receiving thousands of calls about Part D and Medicare Advantage; they are among the most controversial issues confronting Congress.

The assistance your SHIP provides to your member's constituents—explaining the complexities of Medicare so they are able to access appropriate health care—will be recognized and appreciated. Many different groups go to Congress asking for funding or assistance, but explaining the need for a sustained and increased level of funding for continued work on the Part D and Medicare Advantage programs certainly will resonate. Finally, be sure to say that funding is essential to maintain the level of services, including education, counseling, and assistance, that your program provides to your clients (and the member's constituents).