

SHIP Corner: Ohio Finds Success by Targeting Beneficiaries New to Medicare

SHIP Corner is a feature in the Weekly Digest designed to showcase the best practices, successful initiatives, and significant achievements of the state SHIP offices in areas such as program design, partnerships, outreach, tools and resources. Check back here for regular new features. The features will also be available on SHIPtalk.org.

The Ohio Senior Health Insurance Information Program (OSHIIP) piloted a new program this year called “Welcome to Medicare” that targets people turning 65 when they most need information about their new health insurance options. Events featuring a panel of experts were held in three cities — Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati — based on population data from the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles. The programs were a huge success and plans are already underway to expand the program for 2009.

Planning and Promoting “Welcome to Medicare”

Gretchen Lopez, OSHIIP’s director, decided to target people new to Medicare because she was aware that Medicare options can be confusing and overwhelming to people accustomed to other types of insurance products they’ve had in the past. “We wanted to promote the OSHIIP program not only to help people for the moment, but take the first step in establishing an ongoing relationship with them when they first come into the system,” Lopez said. She added, “In this way, we can promote OSHIIP as the go-to source for Medicare information for years to come.”

Lopez purchased a list from the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles that gave her lists of people turning 65 over the next 5 years and sorted it by birth date and county. It was then decided to pilot test the program in three counties where the highest concentrations of people from the list were turning 65 in 2008. This turned out to be the counties with Ohio’s three largest cities.

Mailing labels were created and postcard invitations were sent to a total of 26,000 people. Invitations went out a few weeks before each scheduled event and people were asked to RSVP, either by e-mail or by calling a particular OSHIIP staff person. “Since this was a pilot program, we had no idea what the response would be so it was difficult to plan,” said Lopez. “We decided to have the events in the late afternoon and evenings since many people in this age group are still working.”

The Success of the Events

The first event played to a standing room only crowd May 22 in Cleveland. The room held only 89 people, so Lopez quickly scheduled two additional late afternoon and evening events one week later. Because the turnout was so great, the event for Columbus was moved to an auditorium holding almost 500 people.

In Cincinnati, two extra sessions were also added to meet the demand. Overall, from the first event in May to the last event July 31, 920 people, including mostly beneficiaries and some family members, attended seven events. Features that made the events a success included:

- Having a panel of experts including representatives from OSHIP's training office, CMS, Social Security Administration (SSA), Ohio's Medicare Quality Improvement Organization (KEPRO), and from ProSeniors, Inc., recipient of the Medicare Fraud and Abuse Grant.
- Allowing sufficient time — 2.5 hours — or more for the events including time for the panel presentations and questions from the audience.
- Covering topics such as the Low-Income Subsidy Program (from SSA), Medicare fraud and abuse, Medicare Parts A and B (from CMS), Medicare Part D, and quality of care issues.
- Answering questions about Part D because many people erroneously think they don't qualify because they don't qualify for the low-income subsidy.
- Including family members of beneficiaries, if they wanted to come.
- Handing out bags with brochures and other information from the organizations on the panel and providing materials at the 4th- to 6th-grade level in plain language.
- Providing free screening services from health partners such as Prevent Blindness Ohio which provided glaucoma screenings.
- Giving information and screening services to all who came, including those who came without an RSVP and couldn't get in the session because it was full.

Future Plans

Lopez plans to repeat the "Welcome to Medicare" events in 2009 and expand the program to nine locations next spring. She also plans to schedule events in auditoriums in order to accommodate as many people as possible. Moreover, she will be approaching more health partners to offer medical screenings. "At least if we have to turn people away from our presentation, we can give them lots of educational information and other services," she added.

Lopez and her staff received much positive feedback from the attendees. "It's obvious: the demand for education about Medicare is high and our efforts to link to those new to Medicare must continue," said Lopez.

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