

## **Rural Outreach Strategies – Building Relationships with Small Town Media**

Like many of you, Frank Brown, the State Health Insurance Assistance Program ([SHIP](#)) Regional Medicare Coordinator with the Northern Arizona Council of Government (NACOG) in Flagstaff, Arizona, has a large rural area to cover and a limited amount of resources. He has learned that one successful way to reach out to a large area and audience of beneficiaries is through ongoing conversations with local media.

Frank has been with the Arizona State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP) for almost 6 months, and was previously a volunteer counselor in California's Medicare/Medi-Cal program. In the following Q&A, Frank describes how building relationships among local news reporters, especially in rural areas, is extremely important to making your media and beneficiary outreach activities successful.

---

### **Why is it so important to build relationships with the news media?**

Being a rural area, we need to have close ties with the smaller newspapers and community newsletters that are posted. They are really important in the northern region. We also rely a lot on our public service announcements on the radio, as well as networking with our region's adult centers, libraries, and our region's City Chamber of Commerce' to distribute posted media about upcoming presentations, and Medicare training courses.

A lot of times we have deadlines or they have timeframes to post our newsletters that we have to meet. As long as we prepare our newsletters in a timely manner and communicate our needs to our media contacts, then for the most part, working with the media has been a very smooth partnership.

I also keep track of Medicare media reports and any fraud cases that have been exposed by concerned Medicare beneficiaries. Some of the tools I use for research are website search engines, [www.Medicare.gov](http://www.Medicare.gov) Web site and Medicare/fraud news clips on the Internet. Input and teamwork from other regional coordinators also can be a very important asset in resolving these issues in a timely manner. We keep our eyes open for anything that may look suspicious out there and then we educate the community through the media about Medicare and Medicare fraud.

**Would you say that support from the local media is important to your outreach activities?**

Absolutely. Word of mouth is always good, but the media is an excellent resource tool to reach out to Medicare and disabled beneficiaries, as well as professionals in the outlying areas. We are in a centralized location, and although I do have volunteers throughout the region, the media helps us extend our reach.

**What kinds of activities do you feel it's helpful/necessary to reach out to your local media?**

We coordinate and educate our regions' communities with Medicare presentations throughout the region. Other media vehicles we use are Medicare exhibit booths at conferences and community health fairs. We post these types of events in public events calendars and other areas where people may look for community activities.

**Is there a specific event that let you know your media outreach efforts are working?**

Just recently we conducted Medicare presentations in Page and Fredonia, Arizona. Being two of our most isolated communities, there was a very good turnout of people who did respond to the newspaper articles and advertisements. The event was sponsored by Northern Arizona Council of Governments. The ads and media support were very beneficial.

**What is your strategy for effective interactions with the media?**

I've found the most effective way is communication in person. It is always a great help. Getting to know the newspapers and the people you're actually communicating with to distribute your information in their newspaper or radio station. The one-on-one meetings have always helped me.

I feel that it has always been a "help me, help you" world, and it's the same with the media. They are no different than any client you would help in counseling. The difference is we're helping them to understand our media needs and they're helping us by getting information out to beneficiaries in our communities.

**How do you handle the situation when the media contacts you, rather than you contacting them?**

This depends on what type of media information is being requested. For this interview (for instance) it's reviewed by my supervisor for authorization, we'll then call back and we'll work with them on the article they'd like to print.

**What advice do you have for other SHIPs?**

Be candid, be yourself and be prepared when you call. Be accurate and informative when you have conversations and always be available for scheduled meetings whenever possible. In-person communication with the Media and preparation prior to your event's arrival has always been the best type of promotion there is.