

IMPACT



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Increasing the Financial Security of Idaho's Medicare Recipients

The Situation

Seventy-one percent of people ages 65 and older report difficulty paying the escalating costs of their prescription drugs. For those who take several medications daily, the struggle to pay for prescriptions forces them to choose between paying for medications or groceries. In 2004 seniors and people living with disabilities became eligible for a prescription drug benefit through the federal Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act (MMA). The benefit enables Medicare recipients to save up to 65% on the cost of their medications. Low-income Medicare recipients are also eligible for a prescription drug credit of up to \$600 in 2004 and another \$600 in 2005. However, many residents of rural communities may not have the tools needed to make informed decisions about the new Medicare-approved Prescription Drug Discount Card benefits.

The University of Idaho (UI) Extension was awarded a \$50,000 grant by The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services to design and implement Medicare-approved Prescription Drug Discount Card awareness and education campaigns starting the latter months of 2004.

Our Response

The goals of the University of Idaho Medicare Drug Discount card grant are to:

- Develop and implement public information and outreach campaigns through public service announcements, paid advertising, press releases, and other available media.
- Implement community education and outreach efforts focused on reducing confusion, increasing understanding about resources available, and providing support to beneficiaries in decision-making and enrollment.

Eight UI Extension educators provided Medicare Drug Card awareness and education in 39 of Idaho's 44 counties.



Meridian Medicare Drug Discount Card enrollment training

Mass media (television, radio and newspaper ads/articles) were used in 25 media outlets. Educators also utilized Extension and senior citizen newsletters, flyers, posters, pharmacy bag inserts, and table tents displayed in Senior Centers. UI Extension educators formed educational partnerships with 38 state and local organizations such as the Idaho Senior Health Insurance Benefit Advisors (SHIBA), Area Offices on Aging, local senior citizen centers, hospitals, and pharmacies. Extension educators held 260 education events and one-on-one counseling

sessions. We trained 22 volunteers to assist with enrollment events.

Program Outcomes

Extension-produced Medicare-approved Prescription Drug Card public service announcements and purchased advertisements were aired/printed in Idaho mass media 551 times reaching a large portion of Idaho residents. Extension newsletters reached an additional 10,636 Idahoans. UI Extension's Drug Card campaign increased Idahoans awareness of this new Medicare program. For example, in October 2004 the Idaho Falls Area Office on Aging sponsored an enrollment activity and only three people attended. After Extension's television ad was aired in Eastern Idaho to promote a November drug card enrollment activity, 215 phone calls were received. Sixty-four Medicare beneficiaries enrolled in a drug card program and 31 were eligible for the \$600 credit.

Through face-to-face contacts UI Extension educators provided Medicare Prescription Drug Card information to 670 Idahoans. Our collaboration with other agencies reached an additional 1,175 individuals. During the first three months of the grant we documented at least 255 beneficiaries who enrolled for a Medicare-approved Drug Discount Card; the actual number may reach several thousand.

Potential savings for Idaho seniors who enrolled in the drug discount card program during the first three months of the UI education program is \$270,000. Recipients use their savings to purchase other necessities, thus improving their well-being and the economic vitality of their communities. An example is a Caribou County woman who reduced her monthly medication bill from \$360.56 per month (62% of her monthly income) to \$3.51 because the Medicare Program Coordinator helped her to not only enroll for the drug discount card, but to also sign up for free meds—a special program for the very limited income.

Materials developed by UI Extension for the Medicare Prescription Drug educational campaign were requested by the Center for Medicare, the Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service (CSREES) Family Development national program leader, and other state Extension systems.

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