

AFSCME

Retirees Bulletin

AFSCME Calls on Congress to Enhance Medicare Benefits

Thanks to Medicare, older Americans and younger Americans with disabilities can see a doctor and go to the hospital when needed. It provides a solid base for the health and financial security of retirees. When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed Medicare into law in 1965, he promised that “no longer will older Americans be denied the healing miracle of modern medicine.” To maintain that promise Congress must expand Medicare benefits. Medicare does not cover necessary care like routine dental exams, cleanings and restoration, hearing exams and hearing aids, and basic eye exams and eyeglasses – all of which are fundamental to the health and well-being of retirees. To ensure that all Americans may continue to have the dignity and freedom of a secure retirement that comes with having quality, affordable health care coverage, **AFSCME urges Congress to pass legislation to enhance Medicare to cover dental, vision and hearing aid benefits.**

Dental Benefits

Nearly half of Medicare beneficiaries (47%), 24 million Americans, do not have dental coverage because of lack of coverage and high costs. Almost half of all Medicare beneficiaries did not see a dentist within the past year (47%). For beneficiaries who are Black or Hispanic, roughly two-thirds did not visit a dentist in the past year. For Medicare beneficiaries who did receive dental services, one in five spent more than \$1,000 in out-of-pocket costs for that care. Forgoing dental has a serious impact upon the health of beneficiaries. Without regular dental care, conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease can get much worse. Regular dental visits also help prevent delays in the diagnosis of serious medical conditions which can result in costly emergency room visits.

Hearing Aids and Hearing Exams

About half of all Americans older than 60 and two-thirds older than 70 have some degree of hearing loss. Although hearing loss increases with age, Medicare does not cover the cost of routine hearing exams or hearing aids. This forces most Medicare beneficiaries to pay 100% of the cost of hearing aids and exams out of their own pocket. Maintaining effective hearing is vital to a seniors’ quality of life because hearing loss can lead to loneliness, isolation, depression, anxiety, communication disorders and contribute to the onset of dementia.

Vision Benefits

Medicare only covers eye care related to illness or injury of the eye, including cataract surgery, glaucoma screening, eye examinations for persons with diabetes, and certain tests and treatments for age-related macular degeneration. Most older Medicare beneficiaries use and rely upon eyeglasses to see, but neither yearly eye exams for most beneficiaries nor corrective lenses are covered. Some 20.3 million Americans on Medicare pay an average of \$230 out-of-pocket for vision care each year.

Summary

Enhancing Medicare to include dental coverage, hearing exams and hearing aids, and basic vision care and eyeglasses would be transformational in the lives of beneficiaries and their families. It is time to expand Medicare to cover these vital benefits. AFSCME strongly urges Congress to pass legislation to enhance Medicare to cover dental, vision and hearing aid benefits.

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