

Letter to the Secretary: June 11-13, 2006, Camden, Maine

June 22, 2006

The Honorable Michael M. Leavitt
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Leavitt,

I would like to share with you findings from our most recent field meeting in Camden, Maine on June 11 - 13, 2006. As you know, each year, the Committee conducts two field meetings to speak with local rural health experts in order to inform the Committee's Annual Report for that year.

This year, the Committee visited Camden, Maine to learn more about issues related to the 2007 Report topics of Medicare Advantage, Head Start, and substance abuse. The meeting was quite informative as health and human service experts from across the State took time to meet with the Committee and talk about issues facing their communities as they pertain to the 2007 Report topics. The site visits also afforded Committee members a chance to get out and visit rural communities. The Substance Abuse Subcommittee members visited a non-profit service organization in Bucksport, Maine while the Head Start Subcommittee visited a Head Start Center in Ellsworth, Maine. The Medicare Advantage Subcommittee met with representatives from a local health insurer to understand the dynamics of offering Medicare Advantage products in predominantly rural States.

One issue that arose during the meeting cannot wait until the 2007 Report is released. The Committee is very concerned that CMS has not released 2006 enrollment data for Medicare Advantage plans that do not include a Part D benefit. In previous years, the first-quarter Medicare Advantage enrollment data has been available in mid-April. While CMS did release enrollment data for stand alone drug plans and Medicare Advantage plans with a Part D component on schedule, the data for all other Medicare Advantage plans was absent. Without these data, the Committee cannot adequately analyze the impact of Medicare Advantage plans, particularly the new Regional PPO plans, on rural areas. I strongly encourage you to work with

CMS to release the 2006 enrollment data for Medicare Advantage plans as soon as possible so that the Committee may incorporate the data into the 2007 Report.

Within the next several months, the Committee will work to finalize drafts of the 2007 Report chapters. The next field meeting will be held in Devil's Lake, North Dakota, September 28 - 30, 2006.

Sincerely,

David M. Beasley
Chair