

Retiree Advocate

A State Affiliate of the National Alliance for Retired Americans

October 2009

President's Corner

Jean Friday, President of PARA

Disinformation at it's Worst

The shouting and incivility displayed at health care reform town hall meetings this month have been disturbing, but former Congressman Dick Armey's outlandish statement that Medicare is "Tyranny, capturing seniors in the program and not letting them out" is the most bizarre statement I have ever heard. When approaching age 65, new enrollees receive cards giving them the opportunity to either sign up or decline coverage for both Medicare Part A and Medicare Part B. Once their choice is made, they mail the cards back to the Social Security Adm. If they fail to enroll voluntarily in the programs at that time but later decide to join, they face a stiff fine of 1% for each month not covered which results in permanent higher premiums. Everyone I know can hardly wait to turn 65 to have the security of Medicare. I have never known anyone who turned it down, and once covered, the drop out rate must be close to **zero**. It's hard to believe that Mr Armey, with a master's degree in economics and a PhD in teaching, who spent 16 years in the House of Representatives becoming the Majority Leader, has such a misconception of Medicare. We'll have to check his voting record on Medicare issues.

Mr Armey, the chairman of Freedom Works, and other opponents of social safety nets and taxation are behind these scare tactics to kill healthcare reform. The distractions are designed to stop any civil dialog on concerns about the bills and to plant seeds of doubt with their scare tactics. When they talk about "death counseling", they are referring to a proposed plan to **pay** your doctor to consult with you on making a Living Will and also to advise people who can no longer be helped by medical intervention to live the remainder of their life in dignity and comfort. Don't let them scare you! The latter is called hospice and both programs have been in effect for many years. Medicare benefits will be improved with proposals to close the donut hole, to allow Medicare to negotiate drug costs, to do away with co-pays for preventive services, to keep premiums low by using appropriate age ratings, to provide subsidies to employers to retain retiree insurance, to keep employer benefits tax free, to get rid of waste and to allow retirees from age 55-64 to buy into Medicare which increases the pool of people while maintaining good health coverage for this age group. All of these measures will strengthen Medicare.

Private plans are not the answer, they are the problem. The exorbitant salaries of CEOs and company profits take money away from members' care. Rising premiums, deductibles, co-pays and drug costs have brought healthcare to the breaking point for many of our fellow citizens and will only continue unless checked. In addition to the 47 million uninsured, we must remember the 6.2 million unemployed who have lost their jobs and their healthcare since this economic downturn began in late 2007. As they run out of their unemployment benefits and COBRA coverage, they will have to forego care for their health problems because they can't afford it. We must have health care for all with both a public plan to reduce costs and regulated private plans so people can chose for themselves with confidence.

Regional Legislative Conferences a Success

Adam Swope, ARA Staff

This August, PARA began its slate of Regional Legislative Conferences. Each year, PARA holds several of these gatherings around the state to inform members about the year's important issues, at a convenient location for members in each area. Last year, PARA came to Johnstown, York, Dunmore (near Scranton), West Mifflin (near Pittsburgh) and Colleagueville (near Philadelphia) to talk about 2008 election issues.

This year, PARA's Regional Legislative Conferences are focused on Health Care Reform. At each meeting, speakers discussed what changes to Medicare are in the reform proposals, how reform proposals would change the whole system and why seniors should not be frightened by the disinformation being spread by reform opponents. In August, meetings took place in Butler, Reading and center city Philadelphia. In total, around 125 members attended one of the three meetings, representing hundreds more as they report back to their affiliates this fall. Members from the Steelworkers, Electrical Workers, AFSCME, SEIU, Teamsters, Retired Professors, Auto Workers, Teachers, Food and Commercial Workers, Carpenters, CBTU, Machinists, nurses and Sheet Metal Workers; as well as Community Members were in attendance. In Philadelphia, Congressman Chaka Fattah came by to express his support for reform, and his appearance made the local news. In Reading, Congressman Gerlach sent a staffer to speak to the group. He was given an earful by the reform-minded crowd! Other speakers included representatives from the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, the Consumer Workforce Council Campaign, the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals, Health Care for America NOW, Health Care 4 All PA, Physicians for a National Health Plan and the Pennsylvania Alliance for Retired Americans.

Each meeting featured attendees with excellent questions. Through these meetings, PARA is hopefully helping its members, as well as the senior population at large, stay more informed about what health care reform might mean to them. Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, but we'd prefer that everyone's opinion be well informed.

If you were not able to make it this year, or we didn't come to your home town, we hope to see you at a Regional Legislative Conference in 2010!

Loss of Helen Berger

PARA lost a great friend with the passing of Helen Berger, the wife of our founding President, Martin Berger, on August 16th, 2009. She leaves an astounding legacy of activism, working to affect every level of government: local, state and national; while giving unselfishly of herself to make our world a better place to live.

Trade unionism entered her life with her marriage to Sidney Bronstein, a staff member of the International Ladies Garment Worker Union. Mr. Bronstein passed away in 1974, leaving behind Helen and their three children. Three years later she married Martin Berger, also a staff member of the ILGWU, and together they began to lay the path that led to our Pennsylvania senior organizations, the National Council of Senior Citizens and the Pennsylvania Alliance for Retired Americans. Helen also served on the PA Alliance for Retired American Board and was treasurer and chair of government affairs of the Haverford Township Civic Council. In 1998, she participated in the Seniors Legislative Conference in the White House and was also very active with the League of Women Voters.

Along with Marty, she was instrumental in the formation of the Delco Action Seniors, one of PARA's active community affiliates in the Haverford area, serving as their Treasurer and newspaper editor until just two years before she died. We will all miss her and hereby resolve to honor her dedication by continuing to make the world a better place in which to live for all people.

She is survived by her two daughters, Jan Epstein and Nancy Kurtzman, and a son, Adam Bronstein, in addition to five grandchildren. Memorial donations may be made to the Jewish Family and Children's Services, 2100 Arch St., Philadelphia, PA 19103.

PARA endorses "Seniors4Kids"

"Generations United" has created a passionate new voice for children across Pennsylvania – the voice of older Americans. GU's Seniors4Kids (www.seniors4kids.org) is a civic engagement initiative that highlights the role older adults can play in support of issues that directly benefit children and youth. Seniors4Kids is working to create a statewide network of adults age 50+ to increase access to, and improve the quality of, pre-kindergarten. PARA would like to inform our members of this organization, and urge you to get involved if you are passionate about children's issues. There are many ways that you can get involved:

- Join us as a Captain4Kids
- Write letters to the editor or opinion editorials
- Visit with state policymakers
- Share stories or quotes about why you think pre-k matters
- Attend events
- Sign up for our monthly e-newsletter

For more information about Seniors4Kids please contact PA State Coordinator, Yvonne Thompson-Friend at (215) 844-4744 or ytfriend53@yahoo.com.

Dear Alliance Member:

As president of the Alliance for Retired Americans, I know that many older people are scared and confused, fearful of the change that health reform may bring.

But this isn't because they are bad people. They are scared and confused because lobbyists and places like Fox News are spending millions of dollars – and spreading millions of lies – to preserve the status quo. Why? Because they are the winners in our current system, a broken system that puts profits ahead of people, the special interests ahead of the public interest.

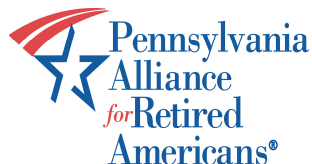
Let's make it our mission to help separate fact from fiction. When someone says to you that health reform will be bad for seniors, set the record straight.

Tell them how we have an opportunity to close the Medicare Part D doughnut hole, lower prescription drug costs, help early retirees afford health care coverage, and assist middle-class families with the costs of long-term care. We can end the out-of-control premium increases at the big insurance companies through fair competition from a high-quality public alternative to the corporations who profit by denying us care and discriminating against our pre-existing conditions.

But it is not just about us. Think about your children and grandchildren. How are they doing in these difficult times? What would happen if they lost their job? At a time of sky-high premiums and unfair rules against pre-existing conditions, would they be able to get health insurance? Would they be able to pay their doctor's bill or get a prescription filled?

We will win this health care fight. We will improve health care in America. Retirees have a lot to gain from health care reform. We can give future generations a retirement that they can count on. This can be our lasting legacy. Thank you for your great work.

Barbara J. Easterling
President, Alliance for Retired Americans



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