



Intensive Outreach Spurs Increase in MSP Enrollment in Louisiana

State officials in Louisiana estimated that some 250,000 people were eligible for Medicare Savings Programs, but only 135,600 participated, according to a fall 2004 newsletter of the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals. Why? The main reason, officials said, was that potential enrollees did not know about the program. For that reason, the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, a State Solutions grantee, used statewide outreach as its principle strategy for increasing enrollment.

Regions on the Front Lines

Sandra Whitten, who coordinated the State Solutions project in Louisiana, gave staff in the state's nine regional Medicaid offices the freedom to use any and all avenues to find people eligible for MSPs, tell them about the program and sign them up. The state's only requirement was that the offices document that they had provided 32 hours a month of staff time in activities related to the project, mainly outreach.

Because they were allowed autonomy, the regions were motivated to get involved, according to Shoshana Sofaer, Dr.P.H., who interviewed staff and wrote a report about the enrollment effort. "Ms. Whitten could encourage, inform, support and provide resources to the regions, but she could not issue orders to them," Sofaer wrote. "The regions were the 'front lines' of the Louisiana State Solutions Project."

Staff members in the nine regions engaged in a friendly competition to sign up enrollees, reflecting their commitment to the target population of seniors and people with disabilities. "They [regional staff members] seem to have a very human and concrete understanding of the difference that enrollment in a Medicare Savings Program has in the day-to-day lives of their clients," wrote Sofaer, "and they are very pleased to be able to help make that difference."

Extensive Outreach

Regional staff members were able to reach out in creative ways because of their deep knowledge of their communities. They scoured the newspapers and spoke with partner organizations to find out which events in the communities might bring them in contact with people eligible for MSPs. Then state workers set up tables at these events, handed

out basic information, answered questions about the MSPs and other Medicaid programs and distributed promotional items with the MSP state logo.

The events ranged from the expected—health fairs, "heart-healthy" events, cholesterol screenings at local shopping malls, senior Olympics—to the unexpected, such as the Louisiana Cattle Festival, a Gusher Days Festival in Oil City, the Delta Music Festival in Ferriday and a bingo party for seniors sponsored by the Council on Aging in the Monroe region of the state. The teams also used these events to develop more contacts by visiting other booths and handing out business cards.

"It is important to note," wrote Sofaer, "that such activities often took place in the evenings and on weekends, rather than during the 'normal' workweek. In addition, they took place throughout the often wide geographic areas covered by each region, not just near their formal offices." The state compensated employees for travel and work performed outside normal working hours.

Overall, staff carried out more than 28,000 hours of MSP outreach during the three-year project, nearly three times the minimum goal it had set. Staff participated in more than 1,800 events and made nearly 800 in-person presentations to groups, distributing nearly 300,000 MSP applications in the process.

Engaging Partners

The regions also added nearly 1,400 groups to their list of "partners"—public agencies, health care and social service providers, faith-based organizations and businesses. The extent of their involvement varied considerably, but it included displaying MSP applications prominently, informing and referring clients, helping clients complete applications, inviting staff or clients to participate in events at which information about MSP was being presented and creating such events.

The most effective "partners" were those that had regular, day-to-day contact with the target groups and were trusted in the community. "We have found that the messenger is very important," said Ruth Kennedy in her May 3, 2007, testimony before the Subcommittee on Health of the U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means. "Our targeted population responds well to a representative at the local Social Security Office, Council on Aging and Meals On Wheels or their doctor, pharmacist or home health provider. Without question, the MSP partners we have engaged have been instrumental in helping raise awareness and increasing enrollment."

The Payoff: A Rise in MSP Enrollment and Reduced Costs

In addition to broadening outreach and engaging more partners, the state simplified its enrollment and renewal processes, making it easier for people to sign up for MSP and

lowering costs at the same time. According to Laura Summer, a researcher at Georgetown University Health Policy Institute under contract to State Solutions, reduced administrative costs saved the state almost \$1.7 million a year.

The result of this multipronged effort: From August 2002 to November 2005, Louisiana increased the number of people involved in the two leading Medicare Savings Programs—the Qualified Medicare Beneficiary program and the Specified Low-Income Medicare Beneficiary program—from 125,151 to 163,392.