

August 11, 2004

Survey Finds Beneficiaries Largely Fault Medicare Law

By ROBERT PEAR

WASHINGTON, Aug. 10 - A new survey suggests that the number of Medicare beneficiaries with negative views of the new prescription drug law far exceeds the number with positive views.

But, it says, beneficiaries want Congress to fix what they see as problems in the law, not repeal it as many Democrats have advocated.

The survey, released on Tuesday by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health, found that 47 percent of beneficiaries had unfavorable views of the law, while 26 percent had favorable views. The rest said they did not have enough information to offer an opinion.

A majority of beneficiaries said they believed that the law would be helpful to most people on Medicare, including low-income people and those with very high drug costs or no other drug coverage. But only 29 percent of beneficiaries believe that the new law will be helpful to them personally, the poll found.

"Views are decidedly more negative than positive," said Drew E. Altman, president and chief executive of the Kaiser Family Foundation, which has been conducting surveys on health policy issues for years. "The law has not been the political plus that the president and Republicans had hoped for."

The White House has cited the Medicare law as one of Mr. Bush's major achievements in domestic policy, showing his ability to fulfill a promise he made in the 2000 campaign. When Democrats controlled Congress, they often promised drug benefits to the elderly, but never delivered, Mr. Bush has said.

The telephone survey was conducted from June 16 to July 21 with 1,223 Medicare beneficiaries: 973 people 65 and older, and 250 people under 65 with disabilities. The margin of sampling error was plus or minus four percentage points.

The survey found overwhelming support for two legislative proposals that have been debated in Congress in recent months: 8 in 10 Medicare beneficiaries said the law should be changed to allow Americans to import lower-cost drugs from Canada and to allow the federal government to negotiate with drug companies to obtain lower prices.

The Democratic presidential nominee, [Senator John Kerry](#), supports both changes. The Bush administration opposes them, saying that imports would pose a danger to public health and that government negotiations could lead to price controls and in any case would not save any more than would competition among private plans.

Beneficiaries were not particularly excited about the drug discount cards that they have been able to use since June. About one-third of beneficiaries in the poll, 34 percent, agreed with the statement that the cards were "worthwhile because they give people on Medicare immediate help before the full prescription drug benefit is available in 2006." But more than half of beneficiaries, 53 percent, agreed with the statement that the cards "are not worth the trouble because they don't do enough to help people with their drug costs, and they are too confusing to use."

Kevin W. Keane, a spokesman for the Department of Health and Human Services, said: "We find some things in the survey that are quite encouraging. Seniors believe the new benefits will be helpful, they want to know more about the benefits, and they do not want them taken away."

Mr. Keane said it was no surprise that some beneficiaries were confused, because, he said, "Democrats have demagogued the issue and tried to scare seniors away from the new program."

The chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa, said his experience at 39 town meetings this year suggested that Medicare beneficiaries liked the law better as they learned more about it.

Some Democrats have said the law is so flawed that they want to scrap it and start over. In New Hampshire in January, Mr. Kerry said, "If I'm president, we're going to repeal that phony bill" and "pass a real Medicare prescription drug benefit" more helpful to consumers.