



Healthcare Reforms Pay Dividends for Millions Strong Through CDBG *by Senator Norm Coleman*

One of my biggest priorities when I entered the Senate in January of 2003 was to work with Congress to implement an affordable and efficient healthcare system and provide much-needed prescription drug coverage. Traveling around the state of Minnesota throughout the past few years, I have heard hundreds of stories about overpriced prescription drugs and ineffective and costly health coverage. I have met with families unable to afford necessary medications for their loved ones and listened to the concerns of many seniors who worry constantly about the upward trend in prescription drug prices.

Given the inherent anxieties of today's world – from potential terrorist attacks to employment to the economy – finding reliable healthcare should not be one of them. America's seniors should have a right to affordable prescription drugs, and all Americans should have access to affordable health insurance plans that meet their particular needs. I'm pleased these very real benefits are starting to be delivered to millions across the country.

Throughout the past year, I have worked hard to promote the benefits of the new Medicare Part D Program and its advantages of affordable, guaranteed coverage for prescription drugs. After an early computer glitch in early January temporarily affected coverage for individuals dually eligible for both Medicare and Medicaid, enrollment in Medicare Part D has skyrocketed. Three months later, I am happy to report that 445,222 Minnesotans – or 63 percent of those eligible – are now covered under Medicare Part D.

Nationally, more than 25 of the 42 million seniors eligible for the program are now covered under the prescription drug benefit. Reform through Medicare Part D has truly been historic. Minnesota's and the nation's enrollment figures are proof that the program works.

Currently, there are more than 250,000 Minnesotans out there who are eligible for Medicare Part D but are not yet enrolled. Open enrollment for the program continues until May 15, 2006, and I want to encourage these seniors to think about signing up for this voluntary program so they can take advantage of affordable coverage. During my listening sessions on this topic and my travels around the state, many seniors who have signed up for the program have raved

about its benefits. Medicare's prescription drug coverage will help pay for a wide array of prescription medication—both generic and name brand drugs. Additionally, recent improvements to Medicare have added more preventative services than ever before.

Health care spending in America has increased from 5 percent of the GDP in 1960 to 16 percent in 2004—and is expected to climb to 18.7 percent in 2014. In recent years, insurance premiums have risen at double digit rates. This increasing burden of health spending on the U.S. economy is unsustainable.

After seeing the way Medicare Part D promoted competition and choice, thus decreasing costs, we look forward to some of the other health care reforms out there. In the same way that providers competed to provide drug plans for seniors, providers will be competing to provide insurance for small business associations. By promoting fewer mandates and more options, effective solutions like Health Savings Accounts have become part of an array of health plans offered to consumers.

The option of setting up a Health Savings Account (HSA) both fundamentally changes and improves the personal financing of health care in America. These accounts make sense and more people are beginning to understand this. In 2005, there were 163,346 Health Savings Accounts in Minnesota. That's an 89 percent increase from 2004! Minnesotans are signing up for HSAs at a rate three to four times the national average. HSAs have been proven to lower monthly premiums and allow those that have set them up to monitor them like a regular checking or savings account. There is no confusion about where your money is going.

It is my job to represent the needs of Minnesotans and finding reliable, affordable healthcare is a priority for many. We have worked hard in Congress to implement these important Medicare reforms and their benefits are beginning to pay dividends for those who have signed up. Likewise, Health Savings Accounts are saving millions of Americans money in healthcare, and I encourage everyone eligible to participate in these revolutionary new programs.

As we look ahead to the future, I believe we should give more uninsured Americans the opportunity to access healthcare through Association Health Plans (AHPs). AHPs will enable small employers to band together and offer access to quality, affordable healthcare for their employees so that small businesses and organizations will have the same competitive advantage that big businesses and unions have. Soon the Senate will take up legislation to help them do just that, and I look forward to being part of this debate and others as we seek to develop innovative solutions for improving healthcare in America.

As always, please feel free to contact my office at 651-645-0323 or www.coleman.senate.gov if you have any questions or concerns about these programs. Or alternatively, you can call 1-800-Medicare to get some of the same questions answered. Likewise, you can contact the Senior LinkAge Line at 1-800-333-2433, or email them at senior.linkage@state.mn.us for more information. One call could help make a world of difference in your health care coverage.