

Concern Continues to Grow about Seniors Being Duped in the Healthcare Debate

There is growing concern among policymakers and care providers alike about the amount of misinformation being heaped upon the nation's seniors regarding the ongoing effort to reform the healthcare system.

"We're hearing a lot of horror stories," Gordon Walker, CEO of the Charlottesville, VA-based Jefferson Area Board of Aging (JABA), tells *Aging News Alert*. "Many of the seniors we see are asking us about Medicare and whether the reform efforts will somehow limit their access to health care. Of course, we're telling them that we don't see anything in the legislation that leads us to believe that's the case."

JABA is one of Virginia's best known and most respected providers of services to seniors. And it was perhaps for that reason its name was fraudulently used in an unscrupulous plot aimed at derailing climate control legislation earlier this summer.

In that incident, bogus letters claiming to represent the interests of JABA were sent to three members of Virginia's congressional delegation -- Reps. Kathy Dahlkemper (D), Christopher Carney (D) and Tom Perriello (D) -- urging them to vote against HR 2454, the so-called "cap & trade" bill. The phony JABA letter was one of several fraudulent letters created by Bonner & Associates, a Washington, DC-based consultancy specializing in organizing grassroots campaigns. At the time of the letter-writing campaign's genesis, Bonner & Associates was a subcontractor representing the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity (ACCCE), a staunch opponent of HR 2454.

In confirming the fraud, the ACCCE claimed it was unaware that the letters were sent, and added that the individual responsible for the ruse has since been fired. Meanwhile, sources close to Rep. Edward Markey (D-MA), chairman of the House Select Committee on Energy Independence & Global Warming, tell us that Markey intends to launch a congressional probe into the bogus letter-writing campaign. (See *Aging News Alert's* posting of Aug. 5: "A Case of Fooling All of the People Some of the Time")

Congress Members Under Fire

More recently, Democratic members of Congress trying to conduct town hall meetings with constituents have been besieged by angry protesters -- many of whom are seniors -- voicing strong opposition to the healthcare reform effort.

"I think a lot of this has more to do with political theater than political discourse," says Walker. "I think most of the seniors who are showing up for those protests are being taken advantage of. They're being misled, and they don't really have all the facts."

Walker notes that many of the protesting seniors are telling their congressional representatives to "keep the government's hands off Medicare."

"That's really funny when you think about it," muses Walker. "Medicare is government-run program ... Years ago people burned their draft cards as a way of protesting the government's involvement in Southeast Asia. I wonder how many of these new protesters would be willing to burn their Medicare cards."

In an interview Wednesday (Aug. 12) with MSNBC's Joe Scarborough, Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO) reflected on the "rowdy" town hall meeting she had the previous day with her constituents.

"What worries me about some of these meetings is the people who have strong opinions are the ones who are most motivated to show up," she said. "And those people who aren't sure, who maybe are hearing this misinformation out there about a ridiculous notion that we would offend the most important voting bloc in America -- seniors -- by telling them what care they could get in the later years of their life."

She added "there were a whole lot of people yesterday at that meeting that came with their minds made up, and they didn't want to hear anything. They just wanted to talk."

Myth-Busting in New Hampshire

In a town hall meeting Tuesday in Portsmouth, NH, President Barack Obama went on the offensive, telling an audience of about 2,000 local residents that critics of the reform effort are creating "boogeymen."

"Spread the facts. Let's get this done," Obama implored the crowd.

Obama drew laughter from his audience when he addressed a recent assertion by former Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin that the Democrats' legislation includes "death panels" that could deny care to seniors.

"The rumor that's been circulating a lot lately is this idea that somehow the House of Representatives voted for death panels that will basically pull the plug on grandma -- because we've decided that ... it's too expensive to let her live any more."

As the president noted, while there are various variations of the Palin pronouncement, they all arose out of a provision in one of the House bills that would allow Medicare to reimburse people for consultations about end-of-life care, setting up living wills, the availability of hospice, etc.

The Irony of the Rumor

"So the intention of the members of Congress was to give people more information, so that they could handle issues of end-of-life care, when they're ready, on their own terms," the president said. "It wasn't forcing anybody to do anything. This is where the rumor came from. The irony is that, actually, one of the chief sponsors of this bill originally was a Republican -- then a House member, now a Senator -- named Johnny Isakson, from Georgia, who very sensibly thought this is something that would expand people's options. And somehow, it's gotten spun into this idea of death panels.

"I am not in favor of that," Obama said with a laugh. "I want to clear the air here."

Asked today (Aug. 12) why Obama is pushing so hard for the reform effort, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said "the president wants to get through the process of getting something to his desk, because delay now simply means ... more people are going to get discriminated against on the basis of a preexisting condition, more people are going to lose their insurance because they get too sick, more people are going to get thrown off their insurance because their employer can no longer afford to pay it. That's the reason the president wants to see this done as quickly as possible."

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