

Bakersfield Rally Outside Offices of House Ways and Means Chairman Sheds Light on Medicare Cuts

Medicare Patients, Concerned Citizens, and Care Providers Voice Concern over Dire Consequences of Pending Legislation Introduced by Congressman Bill Thomas. More Rallies Planned in Congressional Districts of Representatives Who Support Harsh Cuts in Medicare Benefits.

Bakersfield,CA (PRWEB) January 26, 2006 -- Under sunny skies on Tuesday afternoon, the Last Chance for Patient Choice rally at U.S. Rep. Bill Thomas's office helped shed light and focus national attention on hidden provisions in the Budget Reconciliation Act that will drastically affect Medicare patients who rely on oxygen and respiratory equipment to stay alive. Nearly 50 participants paraded peacefully, carrying signs with messages like "No two-tier health care," "No oxygen cuts," "Support America's seniors" and "Please listen."

Last Chance for Patient Choice is a 527 non-profit organization that, among other things, has launched a public information campaign targeting congressmen who are supporting national competitive bidding for home medical equipment, and most recently the 36-month cap on rental of respiratory equipment.

Bill Thomas (R-CA), chairman of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, has been the leading proponent of the misnamed "competitive acquisition" scheme for home medical equipment (which was conveniently buried in the Medicare Modernization Act), and the oxygen cuts, which went into the Deficit Reduction Act during a late-night conference committee meeting.

The rally garnered national media attention, as well as extensive coverage by the NBC, ABC, and CBS television affiliates in Bakersfield, several newspapers, and numerous radio outlets.

Although Thomas was in town, neither he nor his staff spoke with any rally participants. Some political observers speculate that his reticence to speak to the issue publicly could well be because "he had others things on his mind." In the wake of the ever-widening Jack Abramoff scandal, the Boston Globe revealed that Thomas took Congress's most expensive privately-funded trip of 2005 (almost \$28,000 in a private Learjet) to attend a forum in Colorado. Another potentially explosive issue Mr. Thomas may soon be facing was highlighted in recent revelations by the Washington Post that the same late-night meetings which resulted in the aforementioned oxygen caps also benefited private insurers by 22 billion dollars.

More rallies are planned throughout the country in the districts of congressmen who support the idea that it is somehow okay to subject Medicare patients to a lower standard of care by requiring them to use a set of low-bid providers only. Last Chance for Patient Choice says this will create a two-tier health-care system that will force Medicare beneficiaries to accept cut-rate equipment, service, and care.

The already-successful grass-roots effort to focus attention on disturbing elements of the Medicare reform legislation some Medicare beneficiaries and patient-care advocates call "frightening" and "disastrous" began with an organized rally outside Mr. Thomas's Bakersfield offices Tuesday, Jan. 24. "Last Chance" leaders launched its nationwide advocacy effort on the eve of the final budget reconciliation bill vote (S. 1932) by the U.S. House of Representatives that will probably occur during the first week of February.

"We began our effort in Bakersfield because we're particularly concerned about certain provisions in the bill inserted by Thomas himself," explains John Gallagher, vice president-government relations for The VGM

Group (www.vgm.com), an Iowa-based member service organization to which thousands of independent home medical equipment providers belong. “We don’t think he fully realizes how much his proposed legislation will hurt older Americans who depend so much on medical equipment and services.” The VGM Group is the driving force behind the creation of Last Chance for Patient Choice.

About The Issue

Essentially, the provisions Thomas has inserted into the bill eliminate the current option available to older and disabled Americans on Medicare that allows them to continue to rent their home medical equipment, including that used for oxygen therapy. “Beneficiaries choose to rent rather than purchase because renting allows worry-free, professional maintenance of complex medical equipment and lowers costs to seniors,” reports Gallagher. “It is unconscionably unfair, dangerous, and irresponsible for the government to literally force our senior Americans to take title of complex medical equipment after an arbitrarily capped rental period.”

(www.lastchanceforpatients.org)

Oxygen equipment is essential for the 1 million Americans who suffer from respiratory illnesses such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and require oxygen therapy to survive. Oxygen is a federal legend drug and the necessary devices and equipment are prescription-only elements. Medicare beneficiary advocates are concerned that transferring the burden of maintenance and repair of sophisticated oxygen technologies to patients presents a serious risk to their safety and care.

The Home-care Industry Response

Oxygen patients have not asked for any more "control" over their equipment. Long-term oxygen patients cannot walk to their mailboxes without becoming breathless, let alone handle a lot of extra responsibility for maintaining medical equipment they don't understand. Long-term oxygen users are generally very satisfied with their home-care providers as measured by patient satisfaction surveys.

Beneficiaries, who are often older and/or handicapped, do not know when servicing is necessary. Many cannot even begin to follow a manufacturer's warranty or recommended maintenance schedule. They have no exposure to product recalls mandated by the FDA and would not know how to comply with a recall if needed.

Oxygen is an FDA-regulated drug produced from FDA-regulated medical devices. Home-care providers ensure that they are maintained regularly. “Does Congress really want to put frail seniors at risk of death or re-hospitalization due to low oxygen levels?” asks VGM Group Founder and CEO Van Miller. “We don’t think they do, so we’re doing our best to make sure the American public does understand what’s going on with the future of their health care.”

Homecare Industry Attorney Voices Concern about Scope of Federal Powers and Inevitable Expansion---Doctors Next?

“I am especially concerned about the unbelievably broad range of almost dictatorial powers that Mr. Thomas’s legislation will put into the hands of the Secretary of Health and Human Services,” reports Jim Walsh, president of VGM Management, Ltd. and general counsel to The VGM Group. “Furthermore, once the federal government gains final control over the HME sector of health-care industry, what’s to stop Washington bureaucrats from taking away the patient’s right to choose their own hospitals, pharmacies, home

health-care providers, assisted care facilities, therapists and even physicians? What will stop the bureaucracy from growing, once they've tasted blood?"

Walsh asserts that Thomas's "competitive acquisition" legislation is nothing more than a thinly-veiled first step in a concerted effort to eventually convert America's traditional free choice health-care system into a government-controlled, two-tier system with Medicare beneficiaries receiving the worst service and cheapest equipment from a small group of government-sponsored cut-rate providers via a cleverly-spun scheme that has been purposefully misnamed 'competitive bidding'."

Links to additional resources:

www.vgm.com

www.lastchanceforpatients.org

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Contact Information

Carolyn Cole

Last Chance for Patient Choice (a 527 not-for-profit)

<http://www.lastchanceforpatients.org>

1-800-642-6065