

FALL 2010



# Inside Medicare Rights

## FROM THE DESK OF JOE BAKER

*Getting Medicare right.* It's not only the tagline for our organization. It's a real philosophy that drives the work that we do. From our national hotlines, where we help one person at a time, to our education and policy initiatives, which are designed to help all people with Medicare, we work to put consumers' interests first. And in the coming months, as health reform is implemented, we will remain especially vigilant to make sure that the reforms work for Medicare consumers.

One notable issue on the horizon is related to enrollment periods for people with Medicare. While the enrollment period this fall between November 15 and December 31 remains unchanged, starting in 2011 there is a new disenrollment period, which will run from January 1 to February 14. During this period, people may disenroll from a Medicare private health plan, also known as a Medicare Advantage plan, to Original Medicare. For more details about enrollment periods, see "Enrollment Period Changes on the Horizon" in this issue.

Also starting next year, Medicare will cover an annual wellness visit, and copays and deductibles will be eliminated for many preventive benefits. We will be watching these and other changes carefully to make sure Medicare gets it right for consumers.

We pledge to continue the fight to get Medicare right.

We're also looking forward to a full schedule here at Medicare Rights. Once again, our annual Awards Dinner fast approaches. The event will take place on Monday, October 18, at 6:00 p.m., and we have secured, at a very good price, a fantastic location this year: the Mandarin Oriental in New York City. This year we honor Nita M. Lowey, U.S. Congresswoman; Susan D. DeVore, President and CEO of Premier Healthcare Alliance; and Dennis Rivera, Special Advisor to the President of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). With first-rate food and drinks and breathtaking views of Central Park, it will surely be a night to remember. And there is still time to register! For additional information, please visit [www.medicarerights.org/events](http://www.medicarerights.org/events) or call 212-204-6223.

With all of the new and exciting changes taking place in the health care system in our country, keeping Medicare in the conversation is more important than ever. We will continue to be the voice of older adults and people with disabilities, and we pledge, as always, to continue the fight to get Medicare right.



Please join us  
for our  
**2010 Awards Dinner**

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or call **212-204-6223**.

MEDICARE RIGHTS CENTER

2010 Awards Dinner

MONDAY, OCTOBER 18  
Mandarin Oriental, NYC  
6:00 pm

## By the Numbers

From January 1 to August 31, 2010, volunteers contributed **5,035 hours** to the Medicare Rights Center.

## MEDICARE RIGHTS IN THE NEWS

**The Medicare Rights Center continues to build on its reputation as a go-to resource for people with Medicare. This summer, Medicare Rights President Joe Baker answered Medicare questions on a *New York Times* blog as part of its "Ask an Expert" series. In early August, Joe appeared on C-SPAN's *Washington Journal* to discuss the impact of health reform on the Medicare prescription drug program.**



Read the *New York Times* blog at <http://ow.ly/2FVHC>

View the video from C-SPAN's *Washington Journal* at <http://ow.ly/2FVQs>

## Enrollment Period Changes on the Horizon

There are important changes to enrollment periods for the 2011 plan year and future plan years. View an enrollment period chart at <http://ow.ly/2FYZA> and learn more at [www.MedicareInteractive.org](http://www.MedicareInteractive.org).

## Staff Profile

**Scott Thomas:**  
Getting an Energy  
Jolt from  
Medicare Rights



**T**hough Scott Thomas, director of education at Medicare Rights, was raised in the Northeast by a family that traces its history back to Salem, Massachusetts, in 1637, he heard the siren call of the West Coast. Eventually, he decamped to study at the University of California, Berkeley, where he earned a doctorate in education.

Scott says that he made his way through graduate school, “waiting tables, hanging out in cafés and reading Foucault. It was one of the most fun times of my life.” Today, he says, some of his closest friendships date from this time.

After finishing his doctorate, Scott moved back to the East to Greenwich Village, where he spent three years as a counselor at The Door, a youth services agency. But the West Coast lured him back to the Bay Area, where he worked first at the American Lung Association, next at Kaiser Permanente Northern California and then at Bay Area Community Resources. He won grants to take tobacco-cessation programs to underserved populations in low-income neighborhoods, substance abuse treatment facilities and mental health centers, among other accomplishments.

But ultimately, Scott says, he needed “an energy jolt,” and he wanted to live closer to his family. So he moved back East and spent six years working as a public health consultant for various foundations and community organizations. While browsing online, he and his wife-to-be separately discovered a job opening for a Director of Education at the Medicare Rights Center, which required the same skills that Scott had used at the American Lung Association. He knew little about Medicare, he acknowledges, but “when I came in for the interviews, I liked the people I met,” and he realized the organization did essential work for people who needed its assistance. What he foresaw, he says happily, is exactly what he got.

Scott now works to make Medicare understandable to the widest possible audience. He has revised the home page of the Medicare Rights Center’s website, MedicareInteractive.org, to make it more user-friendly, and he has simplified the site’s language, in part by shortening sentences and adding definitions for cryptic terms. Currently, he and his colleagues are evaluating Consumer Reports’s Best Buy Drugs materials and adapting them for older adults. Scott also helps train Medicare Rights volunteers in New York City and Westchester.

Savoring his work, Scott says, “When you take care of details, the flow of service to the people who need it happens. Plus Medicare Rights has one of the most engaged and caring staffs I’ve worked with. I’m having a very good time.”

## Volunteer Profile

Peter Kerr

### Three-time Pulitzer Nominee Now Writes for Medicare Rights

I was the black sheep in my family,” admits Peter Kerr, “because I wanted to be a writer.” All his relatives were doctors, he explains. But after growing up in Flushing, Queens, Peter went to the University of California, Berkeley, where he majored in history and became editor of the campus newspaper. He came back, however, to attend the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Years later, Peter now volunteers at the Medicare Rights Center, where he began by answering calls on the consumer hotline, but later switched to writing and editing. In his time at Medicare Rights, Peter has helped create language for a new database for client-related information, and he has worked on such materials as fliers to assist victims of marketing fraud and guides for Medicare beneficiaries who appeal denials of care. For Peter, it’s been a long and interesting road to this point.

As part of his research for his master’s thesis, Peter got himself incarcerated for 10 days in a home for mentally disabled adults, where he documented frequent corruption

and abuse. His reporting led not only to a graduate degree, but also to a four-part series published under his byline in the *Daily News*. The series created enough of a stir that the *New York Times* offered him work as a copy boy.

In all, Peter spent 15 years at the *Times*. He covered the TV industry and illegal drugs (which took him to unsavory neighborhoods around the world). Next he was bureau chief in New Jersey, and finally, he covered health care. During his tenure, his articles were nominated for Pulitzer Prizes three times.

In 1994, Peter left the *Times* to work in public relations for health insurers. He soon became Director of Communications for Empire Blue Cross/Blue Shield, then for Phoenix House, and finally for New York City’s public schools. But he abandoned public relations to teach social studies in a Stamford, Connecticut, high school. Today he spends his time teaching (writing and social studies in Queens, New York), consulting and doing occasional public relations work from his home in Connecticut.

Peter learned about Medicare Rights through his health care reporting and public relations work, and he began volunteering after seeing his parents become flummoxed by Medicare. “They’re very intelligent,” he says, but they became lost in Medicare regulations. Peter wants to help them and others who are similarly at sea, which is why the Medicare Rights Center’s consumer-friendly educational materials are so important.

## BREAKFAST ON HEALTH CARE REFORM

On May 5th, the Medicare Rights Center hosted a well-attended breakfast for an array of grant makers, advocates and other stakeholders. The event featured Medicare Rights Board Chairman Bruce Vladeck, PhD, and President Joe Baker discussing the impact of the recently passed Affordable Care Act on older adults and people with disabilities. Following the discussion, participants raised questions and shared thoughts about how health reform could be leveraged to expand coverage for the Medicare population. Medicare Rights looks forward to hosting similarly engaging events in the coming months.



Board Chairman Bruce Vladeck and President Joe Baker speak at the breakfast



Volunteer Nancy Richardson



Left to right: President Joe Baker, volunteers Mary Cullen and Marilyn Mammana

## TRAININGS FOR NEW VOLUNTEERS

On August 24 and September 15, Medicare Rights held trainings for new volunteers in our New York office. Volunteers, who answer calls on our national hotlines and help out as needed in other departments, make up over three quarters of our workforce. Visit [www.medicarerights.org/volunteers](http://www.medicarerights.org/volunteers) to learn more about volunteering at Medicare Rights.

## Expanding Our Outreach “Exponentially”

Last year, the Medicare Rights Center counseled more than 80,000 callers on our hotlines and enrolled more than 2,000 of them in low-income programs that help make health care affordable.

Now we’ve launched a program that will help us reach significantly more consumers in the future—without increasing our staff. The program is called Community Partners. It pairs us with local organizations whose staffs we train as Medicare counselors and as specialists who help Medicare beneficiaries enroll in low-income financial assistance programs. Says project manager Fred Riccardi, who is also Director of Programs and Outreach at Medicare Rights: “This program will exponentially extend our reach.”

Here’s how Community Partners works. In Stage One, a community organization that wants to provide Medicare counseling fills out a needs-assessment form. We analyze the organization’s responses to ensure that its aims and the Medicare Rights Center’s skills are a good fit. If so, we and our new partner progress to Stage Two.

Stage Two is a three-month training period, during which a Medicare Rights staff member teaches the partner organization’s personnel about Medicare rules and the sophisticated data that a counselor might need, including Medicare basics, health care plan choices, financial assistance programs for needy beneficiaries and the impact of health reform now and in the future. Then the Medicare Rights staff member works alongside novice counselors and supports them during sessions with the organization’s clients. Altogether, the staff person will schedule approximately nine sessions over Stage Two’s three months, and spend roughly equal time teaching and monitoring—and will be

available for telephone support at any time.

In Stage Three, Medicare Rights begins to separate from its close contact with the partner organization, but we continue to lend technical support and also provide refresher training and access to our print materials.

To date, because the Community Partners program is so new, it hasn’t moved into the last stage, Stage Four, with its initial partners. But in the final phase of the program, we plan to survey partners and evaluate each partner’s success. This will produce statistics that can lead to modifications of the program if necessary, and will also help attract financial support to expand it.

Partner organizations benefit because the program increases their effectiveness, helps grateful clients and gives them access to the Medicare Rights Center’s troves of Medicare information, all while enhancing each partner’s impact on the community it serves.

The benefit to Medicare Rights, of course, is that the program enables us to reach an ever-expanding pool of beneficiaries without adding to or overextending our staff.

The concept of Community Partners was hatched in September 2009 and put into action in June 2010. Because we’re based in New York City, we expect to work chiefly within the five boroughs, although Fred says we could probably handle Westchester as well. So far, we’ve partnered with two New York City organizations—the Isabella Resource Center in Washington Heights and Hamilton Madison House on the Lower East Side. Plans are afoot to add a third Partner, the Hospital for Special Surgery.



Fred Riccardi works with staff at the Isabella Resource Center

## A New Look for Medicare Interactive

Medicare Interactive, the Medicare Rights Center’s free online counseling tool, has undergone a makeover. With a cleaner design and a more intuitive layout, the tool still offers the same clear and accurate Medicare information for consumers, caregivers and professionals. Take a look at the new design at [www.MedicareInteractive.org](http://www.MedicareInteractive.org).



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[www.medicarerights.org](http://www.medicarerights.org) | [www.medicareinteractive.org](http://www.medicareinteractive.org)  
Hotline: 800-333-4114

*The Medicare Rights Center is a national, nonprofit consumer service organization that works to ensure access to affordable health care for older adults and people with disabilities through counseling and advocacy, educational programs and public policy initiatives.*

**MEDICARE RIGHTS CENTER**  
Getting Medicare right