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CMS now offers more support for caregivers

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS) launched a new initiative on September 18, 2008 designed to provide information, tools, and materials for caregivers. The stated purpose is to assist caregivers and their loved ones in making informed healthcare decisions. It can best be described as a "web-based resource center." CMS reports that it is important to "raise national awareness of the critical service provided by caregivers in communities across the country," and they have committed themselves to helping caregivers "navigate through the tools that can significantly improve their life and that of their loved one."

There are over 4.4 million Americans, according to CMS literature, who provide unpaid care to a loved one, although most of them do not think of themselves as caregivers. In 2006, this unpaid care was valued at \$350 billion, which was money that taxpayers did not need to pay. The caregiver's work is essential, but exhausting and stressful. CMS is aware that a substantial portion of the caregiving "job" involves advocacy and learning about the benefits available for seniors or disabled persons.

Medicare has had a website for many years which is intended to provide information for Medicare beneficiaries. The new web page, www.medicare.gov/caregivers, is designed to provide accurate and unbiased information for *caregivers*. Sections of the web page address the Medicare program and what it covers, as well as how to access other important resources to help with care of a Medicare beneficiary. Since many Medicare beneficiaries themselves do not fully understand Medicare and its benefits, this new web page may offer significant benefits to adult children seeking to understand their parents' benefits, and to learn how best to help their parents. CMS will offer key partner organizations to help caregivers and beneficiaries by providing direct links to the organizations. Personal stories of caregivers in the community are included on the site also.

A recent visit to the web page for caregivers lists the following topics, other than "Navigating Medicare" as mentioned above. There is a section listing sub-topics under "Help with Billing," and another section describing "Care Options." For caregivers who are feeling overwhelmed, there is a section listing options for getting help. Direct links to other pages on the Medicare website are provided to assist caregivers in accessing the information needed easily and quickly.

An e-newsletter is planned to launch in November, which will be emailed bi-monthly to those who sign up. The newsletter will provide information on important dates (i.e. open enrollment), changes in the programs, for instance changes in coverage of particular services, and general basic information about the Medicare program of interest to caregivers.

CMS has stated an admirable goal of building a relationship with caregivers to help streamline caring for Medicare beneficiaries, and thus, hopefully, lighten the load of caregiving. Caregivers, no matter whether providing direct physical care, or providing help to Mom or Dad with coordinating care and benefits, will certainly benefit from spending some time regularly on this site.