

Siouxland Aging Services

Mission: Enabling Older Iowans to live with maximum possible dignity, well-being and independence.

> Serving Seniors in Cherokee, Ida, Monona, Plymouth and Woodbury Counties.

> A newsletter from the Advocacy Coordinator, Chris Kuchta.

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Your Advocate's Advice

Conversations with Chris

A sampling of current news for seniors!

For the week of May 31-June 4 – Farmer's Market Vouchers

Freshness abounds at local Farmer's markets. Available beginning on June 7th, booklets will have 10 checks for a total value of \$30. Booklets are limited in supply and limited to one per senior.

To be eligible for the checks, seniors must be:

- Age 60 or older on the day they pick up checks
- Have a household income of \$20,036 for an individual or \$26,955 for a married couple.
- Live in Ida, Cherokee, Monona, Plymouth or Woodbury counties.

Farmer's Market checks will be available at local meal sites during distribution times set by each site's manager. Seniors may also pick up booklets at Siouxland Aging Services beginning on June 7th between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Checks can only be picked up in person, as paperwork must be completed. No mail or phone orders can be accepted.

Checks can be redeemed at local Farmer's Markets with vendors who accept these checks. Checks cannot be pre-signed, as seniors must sign checks when the purchase is made.

If you are physically unable to pick up or use Farmer's Market checks, proxy rules must be followed. Call Siouxland Aging Services for details.

For the week of May 31-June 4 – Medicare Gap Rebates

Health reform has been passed and has a number of positive benefits for you as seniors. One of the benefits is the elimination of the Medicare Part D gap or "donut hole" where drugs are not covered. It is expected that by 2020 this gap will be completely gone with seniors paying 25% of drug coverage once they meet their annual deductible.

This change will come in increments. This year (2010), anyone who has out-of-pocket drug costs that put them into the coverage gap will receive an automatic \$250 payment from Medicare. You will not have to do anything to claim this rebate, once you reach the gap. Checks will come in the mail from Medicare beginning in June.

Unfortunately, scammers will try to convince those on Medicare to sign up for "Obamacare insurance" (not a real program) or to give out personal information to claim this rebate. The government never goes door-to-door or calls to sell you insurance. Be safe and spread the word that you don't need to do anything to claim your rebate if you reach the coverage gap.

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Father's Day gifts

available at Siouxland Aging Services! Choose between tickets for 10 or 20 meals OR tickets for transportation in town or between towns!

For the week of June 7-11 – Manage the Pain of Medical Debts

With healthcare costs soaring and family budgets tightening, it's no wonder that medical debts are a major headache for many Americans. If you're facing the financial and emotional stress of medical bills and you're not sure how — or if — you can pay them, here are some suggestions from *FDIC Consumer News*.

Guard against billing and insurance errors. Get an itemized statement from each health care provider and make sure the services and costs listed are correct. Contact your provider if you find a mistake or you need clarification. Also, if you believe your health insurer denied or reduced a payment incorrectly, you may appeal that decision with your insurer. Check also with your state's department of insurance for any other rights you may have.

Contact the doctor's office or hospital immediately if you don't think you can pay a medical debt. Explain your situation and try to negotiate the bill or offer a reasonable payment plan before it is referred to a collection agency. "Medical debts that go unpaid can be reported to the credit bureaus and damage your credit record," said Bobbie Gray, an FDIC Community Affairs Specialist. "Not only will you still have debts, but you may end up paying more to borrow money in the future, if you're approved to borrow at all."

For big medical expenses that are not covered by insurance, think twice before charging them to a credit card or a loan with a high interest rate. If you expect to pay the bill back over a long time period — perhaps over several years — the interest costs can end up far exceeding the charges from your healthcare providers. Also, putting a medical bill on your credit card results in the expense no longer being considered a medical debt, and that may limit the ability of low-income patients to obtain financial assistance from Medicaid or other programs. Instead of turning to credit cards for medical bills you're sure you can't pay in full at the end of the month, talk to your healthcare providers about the possibility of extending payments for, say, a year or more.

But what if you decide to gradually pay your medical bills using credit? "Shop around for the lowest interest rate, perhaps a fixed rate that will stay in effect for as long as you expect to be making payments," added Gray. "Also be aware that many healthcare providers have arrangements with certain lenders to promote their loans and credit cards for medical debts, so do some research to find the card that's best for you. Don't turn to the provider's recommended form of credit just because it appears to be the easiest way to pay."

Only use your home to finance medical bills as a last resort. Home equity loans enable you to borrow money against your home's value to pay for major expenses, including medical debts, and perhaps qualify for a tax deduction on the interest payments. But remember that if you borrow using a home equity product, and you cannot make the loan payments, you could lose your home.

"Your house is a valuable asset," said Luke W. Reynolds, Chief of the FDIC's Community Outreach Section. "You should think very carefully before putting your home on the line to finance medical debts."

Be very careful before withdrawing money "early" from your retirement savings to pay for medical expenses. Taking funds from an Individual Retirement Account (IRA) before age 59½ sometimes can trigger sizeable tax penalties. Also, the more money you take out of IRAs, 401(k) accounts and other retirement plans before retirement, "the less you will have available for other needs during retirement, plus you will lose out on the ability of the funds to compound and grow," said Reynolds.

Before putting your financial future at risk by taking an early withdrawal from an IRA, ask your healthcare provider about a realistic repayment plan.

Don't be afraid to ask for additional help. Depending on your age or income level, you may qualify for aid in handling medical debts under the federal Medicaid program or state government initiatives. Many hospitals offer free or discounted care for patients who don't qualify for government programs and meet specific financial criteria. Most hospitals also have financial counselors who can help patients understand the various programs and help with applications.

In addition, a reputable credit counseling service may be able to help consumers get their medical debts under control. And, if you have medical bills that have been sent to collection, you may negotiate to reduce the bills and pay them through an installment plan.

For the Week of June 14-21 – Prevent Home Repair Scams and Disputes

Iowa's Attorney General reminds us that spring is here -- prime time for home improvement fraud and scams. We see it every year. Home repair needs pile up over the winter, and everyone is eager to make improvements. It's prime time to be beware of scams and questionable contractors. Home improvement fraud includes contractors who ask for substantial up-front payments, do little or no work, and never finish the job right. Other contractors offer a low price and then charge a lot more as the job progresses. Others are "fly-by-night" traveling con-artists working their roofing or paving or chimney-repair scams.

Follow these tips to avoid being taken by home repair scams and disputes:

1. Don't fall for the "knock-at-your-door" scam, where someone shows up "out of the blue" and says your driveway needs repaving, or your house needs new shingles – and they "just happen to have materials left over" at a big discount! They are sure to take your money and run, without doing the job at all or doing it right.

2. Check out contractors before you sign a contract or pay any money. Request local *references* -- and check them out. Contact the Attorney General's Office to see if it has *complaints* (call 515-281-5926 or 888-777-4590.) Contact the Better Business Bureau (515-243-8137 or www.bbb.org.) Check to see if a contractor has been sued by unsatisfied customers (or sued them) -- go to www.iowacourts.state.ia.us.

3. Get several written estimates, choose the best, and get a contract in writing. Before any work begins, agree on a *written contract* detailing work to be done, the price, who's responsible for permits, and any other terms. Ask for a copy of the contractor's liability insurance certificate. Put start and completion dates in writing, and consequences if the contractor fails to meet them. (Example: the contract could be nullified if the contractor doesn't start on time.) It usually is safer and a better deal to obtain financing through your local bank or credit union, rather than a contractor. Note, if you sign a contract at a place other than the contractor's regular place of business – such as at your home – you usually have three business days to cancel the contract.

4. Avoid paying large sums in advance. If you need to make a partial advance payment for materials, make your check out to the supplier *and* the contractor. Insist on a "mechanic's lien waiver" in case the contractor fails to pay others for materials or labor.

For more information or to file a complaint, contact the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division, 1305 East Walnut Street, Des Moines, Iowa 50319. Call 515-281-5926, or toll-free at 888-777-4590. The web site is www.IowaAttorneyGeneral.gov.

For the Week of June 14-18 – Ticket to Work for Seniors with SSI

During the recent tough economic times, if you're a senior citizen who wants to work but doesn't want to risk losing benefits — Social Security has just the ticket for you: the Ticket to Work program. The Ticket to Work program is designed to help individuals under 65 who receive Social Security Disability Insurance or SSI to obtain employment support services free of charge.

When you use your Ticket, you can get help searching for a job, creating a resume, tips on interviewing, or other assistance. These services are provided at no cost to you by employment networks, which are private organizations or government agencies that have agreed to work with Social Security to provide employment services and other support to beneficiaries with disabilities and state vocational rehabilitation agencies. The Ticket to Work program gives you the opportunity to choose from a variety of employment networks.

Interested in putting your Ticket to work? Learn more about Ticket to Work and how to get one by calling MAXIMUS Inc., at 1-866-968-7842 (TTY 1-866-833-2967). MAXIMUS is a private company working with Social Security. They can answer most of your questions about your Ticket and can give you the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of "employment networks" or the state vocational rehabilitation agency in your area. Iowa Workforce Development centers are approved Ticket to Work Employment Networks. For contact information you can visit www.iowaworkforce.org or 866-520-8986 x 107. For information and the location of Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services go to www.ivrs.iowa.gov or the Iowa Department for the Blind at www.blind.state.ia.us.

In addition to the Ticket to Work program, Social Security has work incentives that help serve as a bridge between disability benefits and financial independence. These work incentives include cash benefits while you work, Medicare or Medicaid while you work, and help with any extra work expenses you may have as a result of your disability. You can find more information about Social Security and SSI work incentives by visiting The Work Site at www.socialsecurity.gov/work.

For the Week of June 21-25— Reverse Mortgage Counseling

Helping older adults examine their home equity options to stay at home.

If you or someone you know is considering a reverse mortgage, you must get counseling from a government-approved agency. Be very careful with the information presented by representatives from companies selling reverse mortgage products as you weigh the pros and cons of a reverse mortgage. The **Reverse Mortgage Counseling Services Network** is one of five national counseling groups approved by the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD).

A reverse mortgage allows homeowners aged 62+ to convert a portion of their home equity into cash while they continue to live at home for as long as they want. Their counselors are exam-qualified aging services professionals who can help you:

- **Evaluate the pros and cons** of a reverse mortgage for your situation.
- **Apply for public and private benefits** that can help you pay for needs like home energy, meals, and medications.
- **Find services in your community** that can help you stay independent longer.

Make an Appointment

To schedule a counseling session, call toll-free (800) 510-0301.

There is no fee unless you choose to apply for a reverse mortgage. They also waive the \$125 counseling fee for older adults who:

- Are facing financial challenges such as foreclosure.
- Have modest incomes — under \$20,000 for single homeowners and under \$30,000 for couples.

For the week of June 21-25 —Economic Stimulus Scams

The FTC is warning consumers that they could get stung by an economic stimulus scam. The scams come in different forms. Right now, on the Web and in e-mail, scammers are telling consumers they can help them qualify for a payment from President Obama's economic stimulus package. All they have to do is provide a little information or a small payment.

E-mail messages may ask for bank account information so that the operators can deposit consumers' share of the stimulus directly into their bank account. Instead, the scammers drain consumers' accounts of money and disappear. Or bogus e-mail may appear to be from government agencies and ask for information to "verify" that you qualify for a payment. The scammers use that information to commit identity theft. Some e-mail scams don't ask for information, but provide links to find out how to qualify for funds. By clicking on the links, consumers have downloaded malicious software or spyware that can be used to make them a victim of identity theft.

"Web sites may advertise that they can help you get money from the stimulus fund. Many use deceptive names or images of President Obama and Vice President Biden to suggest they are legitimate. They're not," says Eileen Harrington, Acting Director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection. "Don't fall for it. If you do, you'll get scammed."

Some sites suggest that for a small sum of money - as little as \$1.99 in some cases - consumers can get a list of economic stimulus grants they can apply for. But two things can happen: the number of the credit card the consumer uses to pay the fee can fall into the hands of scam artists, or the \$1.99 can be the down payment on a "negative option" agreement that may cost hundreds or thousands of dollars if the consumer does not cancel.

"Consumers who may already have fallen for these scams should carefully check their credit card bills for unauthorized charges and report the scam to the FTC," Harrington said.

The Federal Trade Commission works for consumers to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices and to provide information to help spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint in English or Spanish, visit the FTC's online [Complaint Assistant](#) or call 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357). The FTC enters complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to more than 1,500 civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad. The FTC's Web site provides free information on a variety of [consumer topics](#).

A Laugh for You!

During a visit to the retirement home, I asked the director, "How do you determine whether or not a person should be institutionalized?"

"Well," said the Director, "we fill up a bathtub, and then we offer a teaspoon, a teacup and a bucket to the patient and ask him or her to empty the bathtub."

"Oh, I understand," I said. "A normal person would use the bucket because it's bigger than the spoon or the teacup."

"No," said the Director, "A normal person would pull the plug. Do you want a bed near the window?"