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# Republicans want to take Advantage in Medicare debate

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*Published: Sunday, October 4, 2009 at 6:30 a.m.*

As the political barbs fly between Democrats and Republicans over who can best ensure the continuation of Medicare, and thus protect senior citizens' access to health care, the GOP defense strategy lately has been to highlight the threat to Medicare Advantage.

Medicare Advantage is essentially an upgraded form of the 44-year-old Medicare program, with the distinction being that Medicare Advanatge enrollees can select a private insurer and still retain the benefits of traditional Medicare.

A precursor to the program was created in 1997 by the Republican-led Congress.

Six years later Congress, still under GOP control, updated that program and dubbed it Medicare Advantage in passing the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act, which also added prescription drug coverage to Medicare.

That controversial bill narrowly passed, 220-215, along a largely partisan vote. Reps. Cliff Stearns, of Ocala, and Ginny Brown-Waite, of Brooksville, whose district encompasses much of western Marion County, were among the 204 Republicans who voted to expand Medicare.

Medicare Advantage was required to offer more coverage than traditional Medicare.

Its recipients can receive prescription drugs, dental care, vision care and even gym or health club memberships. There is also a greater emphasis on preventative care.

Since 2003, the number of Medicare beneficiaries enrolled in Medicare Advantage has almost doubled, rising from 5.3 million to 10.2 million, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, a health care policy research group.

Almost two-thirds of them are enrolled in a health maintenance organization, or HMO, for their care. Other types of insurers can be used.

Medicare Advantage enrollees pay an average monthly premium of about \$34, Kaiser reports, compared to about \$96 a month for traditional Medicare.

Still, Medicare Advantage, like its parent program, is primarily financed by the federal government.

The program now consumes 24 percent of Medicare's total \$477 billion budget.

Although designed to farm out care to private insurers to save money, the government spends about 13 percent more on benefits for Medicare Advantage recipients than those under traditional Medicare.

The outcome of the health care reform debate holds more significance for Florida than most other states.

According to Kaiser, Florida has 3.2 million Medicare recipients, the second-highest total in the country behind California.

Of those, more than 919,000 are covered by Medicare Advantage.

Twenty-two percent of the 86,985 Medicare beneficiaries in Marion County are enrolled in Medicare Advantage, according to Kaiser.

Under the various bills, the cuts to Medicare Advantage could run between \$123 billion and \$156 billion over the next decade.

Congressional Republicans, with Brown-Waite prominent among them, have zeroed in on Medicare Advantage in trying to paint Democrats as the hackers of health care benefits for seniors.

But Jeremy Funk, communications director for Americans United for Change, which supports many of the reform measures including the public option, wrote in an e-mail that the contentions over Medicare Advantage exemplify Republican duplicity.

Medicare Advanatge, he said, is "a government-subsidy sucking leech of a program that shells out tens of billions of taxpayer dollars in unnecessary subsidies to the private insurance industry to provide virtually the same services as regular Medicare - only with a 14-percent higher price tag and with highly debatable improvement in quality."

"The only thing they're defending here are hugely wasteful overpayments to big insurance - overpayments that have resulted in higher premiums for the more than 31 million seniors and people with disabilities enrolled in regular Medicare."

The legislation before Congress will not eliminate Medicare Advantage - just the \$157 billion in overpayments they're supposed to reap over the 10 years if we do nothing."

Although he generally sees Republicans as opportunists in the who-loves-Medicare-more brouhaha, Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies for the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank, counters that the GOP defense of Medicare Advantage is more in line with the party's general philosophy.

"It is not necessarily hypocrisy when they are defending Medicare Advantage," Cannon said.

That's because Medicare Advantage, he added, "is a step toward more competition and letting the marketplace decide, and a step away from the more traditional Medicare and government control."

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