

***Rep. Tom Tangretti  
Remarks to seniors  
Friday, April 13, 2001***

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The General Assembly is poised to tackle some of the most important issues concerning seniors in Pennsylvania during this legislative session.

These issues include the high cost of prescription medications, long-term care for seniors, patient protection for the increasing number of seniors enrolled in managed care plans and HMOs, and nursing home safety.

Some of these issues have already been addressed to some degree through previous legislative efforts, but with some of the bills that have been offered so far during this legislative session, I believe we have the chance in Harrisburg this year to make a huge difference in the lives of many older Pennsylvanians.

One of the most important and most urgent tasks on the General Assembly's legislative agenda is providing prescription drug coverage for more of Pennsylvania's seniors.

The skyrocketing cost of prescription medications has put a terrible strain on many seniors' budgets.

I'm sure that many of you here are feeling that burden.

That is why I and many lawmakers in Harrisburg have been working hard to improve the state's prescription drug program known as PACE.

At the beginning of the year, the House of Representatives passed legislation on a bipartisan basis that would significantly improve the PACENET program, the second tier of PACE that serves seniors who earn more than the PACE's regular income guidelines.

The legislation would increase the income threshold for PACNET significantly, allowing about 400 thousand additional seniors to get prescription coverage under PACENET.

The bill also would address one of the most serious problems with the current PACENET program – the annual \$500 per-person deductible.

That's not a big change overall, but 40 dollars a month instead of 500 dollars a year will allow many more seniors to start getting benefits much earlier in the year.

Another serious concern in Pennsylvania is managed care.

A few years ago, the state passed legislation designed to protect people enrolled in managed care insurance plans and HMOs.

Unfortunately, the Department of Health and other state agencies have yet to start enforcing many of the provisions of that law.

Meanwhile, each year, thousands more seniors are enrolling in managed care plans, either because they want to or, increasingly, because they have to.

Many of these plans have been begun increasing premiums while lowering benefits, or have refused to continue to cover seniors altogether.

The Medicare HMO program was created in 1997 in order to expand health plan options for senior citizens by allowing other types of plans to participate in Medicare.

However, many of those health plans either increased rates substantially or reduced benefits.

Some are even pulling out of Pennsylvania.

About 90,000 seniors statewide were dropped from Medicare-HMO plans in more than 30 counties on Jan. 1.

Many of us in the General Assembly are concerned.

Patients, especially seniors, are suffering.

The state needs to revisit this issue by improving its own HMO law and adding additional protections for patients enrolled in managed care.

Seniors need to be assured that they will receive a minimum standard of care for their premiums, that essential medical costs – including prescriptions – will be covered, and that the procedure for appealing a decision made by a managed care company is easy, understandable, effective and most important, independent.

The General Assembly needs to address these issues concerning the managed care plans it has jurisdiction over, and work with the federal government to address issues with Medicare HMOs, which are overseen by the federal Health Care Financing Administration.

The Golden Years of life should not be filled with constant worry over health insurance costs and difficulties.

A related issue is long-term care in Pennsylvania.

Many seniors are looking to alternatives to institutionalized care, when possible.

Seniors who can want to be at home, and the state needs to put more resources into making sure that this is a viable option for them.

The governor has proposed spending \$18 million next year on home-based care programs, and that's a start.

But I believe that Pennsylvania needs to make an even bigger commitment to the kinds of programs that help make home and community-based care possible for seniors – programs that can bring community services into the home and transportation initiatives that can get seniors out into the community.

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As seniors become more active and have more choices in where and how they want to live and be taken care of, this will become a priority issue in Pennsylvania.

Finally, Pennsylvania has made great strides in the area of nursing home safety over the past several years – but we can do more.

Legislation that's been introduced recently would require nursing homes to submit information about their operations, staff-to-patient ratios and other policies annually to the Department of Health, and require the Department of Health to make that information available to the public.

This legislation was introduced on the heels of an investigation by Auditor General Robert Casey, which revealed glaring safety deficiencies in Pennsylvania nursing homes, and the glaring failure of the state Department of Health to respond in a timely manner to many of the complaints about those deficiencies.

I'm happy to say that Auditor General Casey's investigation alone has fostered great improvement in the system.

The auditor general told the House Appropriations Committee in hearings this February that for several months, Pennsylvania hasn't received any complaints about Department of Health oversight of nursing home care.

In addition, many bills have moved through the House and Senate that offer more protection to seniors being cared for in nursing homes.

These are just some of the many issues facing the General Assembly in its effort to offer the most protection and assistance possible to seniors in Pennsylvania – protection and assistance they have earned and deserve.

I encourage anyone who has questions or concern about health care, prescription coverage, insurance, long-term care or other issue important to seniors in Pennsylvania to contact my office.

We will do our best to help you.

In the meantime, I will continue to update you periodically, both through the mail and by meeting with you personally, on the General Assembly's progress on these issues.

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