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Medicaid cuts don't leave Petal residents untouched

By JOY E. STODGHILL

Staff Writer

At least 50 current Medicaid recipients in Petal must find a new way to pay for their prescription drugs. Many of them will no longer receive coverage from Medicaid beginning July 1.

These cuts are a result of the Medicaid Reform Act passed by a 43-8 Senate majority and a 82-32 House majority on May 7. According to the Mississippi Division of Medicaid's Web site, the state taxpayers can expect \$106 million worth of savings. The cuts will affect recipients of the Poverty Level Aged and Disabled (PLADs) Program. Under this program, people who also receive Medicare benefits and people above the poverty line receive aid. The Web site also points out that Mississippi is the only state that provides aid for those above the poverty level.

Francis Rullan, director of public relations with the Mississippi Division of Medicaid, pointed out the combined problem of population and medical cost increases.

"The purpose of the Medicaid Reform Act 2004 is helping to insure there is a Medicare program in the future," he said.

Sarah Ritter with the Poor, but Proud Mississippians has dedicated herself to writing letters and demanding answers for the 65,000 people statewide who will feel the affects of the Act. She spoke to the Mississippi Senate on June 8 and has not ceased her pleas to the politicians in charge of making decisions for the state. One of the letters sent to Governor Haley Barbour by Ritter set forth 10 questions on behalf of the 65,000 people to be cut. Barbour has not yet responded to her queries or to any of her other letters.

Ritter wrote to Governor Barbour, "You can well imagine what effect this decision is having on the

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—David Allison
Petal AARP president

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65,000. For example, the mentally ill depend on their medicine in order to maintain their sanity. No longer being able to afford their drugs, this will, in time, cause the jails and state hospitals to become overcrowded. Not to mention that crime in the street will probably increase. Pharmacists in Mississippi are already seeing that because of these drastic changes, they will eventually have to lay off employees because of the loss of customers. This drastic decision will have a domino effect."

Ritter and others, such as David Allison, president of the Petal Area AARP Chapter #3802, believe that the 65,000 who will be cut face real hardships ahead.

"As these 65,000 people will no longer be able to afford medical care, it will overflow to the doctors, health clinics and hospitals. People will just get sicker and sicker without their medicine. Some will even die," Ritter wrote.

Allison said, "My heart goes out to these folks. There is a lot of worry. I've heard the word 'despair.' It's difficult for them to talk about their futures."

These people have different options open to them for other prescription drug plans, but, according to Ritter and Allison, may be unable to gain access to the information they need. Since many of them are older or in bad mental or physical health, they lack the means to comprehend the options open to them or the access to the forms and such they need to obtain these benefits. Some applications are available only through the Internet. Other applications require the cooperation of their pharmacists and doctors.

According to Rullan, Medicaid will pay Medicare co-insurance, deductibles and premiums for individuals and couples below the poverty level and will pay the premium for Medicare, Part B for people with

incomes between 100-135% of the poverty level. All of these people are eligible to apply for the Medicare Discount Card program. The card provides discounts on prescription and a \$600 credit for the year. Medicare beneficiaries can receive forms for this program by either calling 1-800-MEDICARE (633-4227) or going to www.Medicare.gov.

The Mississippi Division of Medicaid has requested waivers for people who require more expensive drugs such as anti-psychotics, dialysis for renal failure, anti-rejections for transplant patients and chemotherapy for cancer patients.

Allison points out that even if the people being cut are able to attain some type of prescription plan to take Medicaid's place, they will still need assistance.

"Some programs are available, but at best do not replace the benefits that are lost," he said.

Allison also pointed out the increase in attaining needed drugs from Canada since they are cheaper there than in the United States.

Randy Spears, pharmacist at Petal Drug Co Inc, said, "It's going to impact us economically. But, I'm most concerned for my patients."

Spears pointed out that the majority of the people affected by the cuts are elderly women whose jobs provided no benefits for them and who now have very little income and no husband on whom to rely. Spears expects a \$140 million impact to hit state pharmacies and he also believes most of them will be small pharmacies.

Opal Edwards is one of the many Petal residents affected by the cuts. She recently had a heart attack. Her heart trouble, combined with osteoarthritis in her back require 10 prescriptions totaling \$735. Once she is cut, her only income will be the \$625 she receives from social security.

"I think this is a mess. I just don't know how I'm going to manage," she said