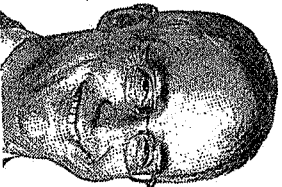


Networking benefits San Francisco feds, community groups

Trying to reach out to lower-income people who may be eligible for federal benefits can be a daunting task. Potential beneficiaries may change addresses frequently, and may not respond to



By DAVID SAYEN

materials sent by mail. Managers at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services for several years have sought to locate more people who qualify for a subsidy to help them pay for prescription drug coverage under Medicare Part D. The subsidy program is known as Extra Help. Last summer, the outreach team at CMS' Region 9 office in San Francisco brainstormed

for innovative ways to reach potential beneficiaries who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to afford Part D on their own.

Since Part D was launched in 2006, CMS has made extensive efforts through outreach events and advertising to sign up beneficiaries for Extra Help. The Social Security Administration also is heavily engaged in Extra Help outreach. But many eligible people remain unaware that the subsidy can save them up to \$3,900 annually.

CMS had been trying to locate eligible beneficiaries with the help of State Health Insurance Counseling and Assistance Programs, or SHIPs. These hard-working nonprofits, which receive federal funding, counsel seniors regarding their Medicare benefits. What if CMS broadened its base of community partners—the numerous local agencies that might have direct contact with the Extra

Help population?

Why not bring them together at the San Francisco Federal Building? To attract community groups, CMS could invite other federal departments that offer programs for low- and moderate-income Americans. In other words, CMS would stage a sort of federal benefits fair.

Thus was born the idea for the Region 9 safetyNETworking conference. Attendees from community agencies could not only pick up information on federal benefits, but they could network with others from community groups. Likewise, federal outreach workers could meet those in the community who might help spread the word about their programs, as well as meet federal colleagues engaged in similar outreach. Held Aug. 14, the safetyNETworking conference drew about 175 people—significantly more than expected—

from community groups across the San Francisco Bay Area. Attendees were able to meet with representatives of the Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Labor, Housing and Urban Development, and Veterans Affairs departments; IRS; Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.; Small Business Administration, Social Security Administration and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

CMS Region 9 organized the event on behalf of the Federal Regional Council, a 10-year-old body that coordinates federal programs in Region 9 to make them more effective.

By most accounts, the event was a hit with community activists. "People were hungry for this information," said Linda Zamfino, who manned a table for SSA.

The safetyNETworking conference was put together quickly on a shoestring budget. It

lasted just four hours. A key organizer was CMS' summer intern, Amanda Bisate, an energetic Seattle University student. I consider this event a successful pilot that could be replicated by other federal agencies. Indeed, two other CMS regional offices are working on networking conferences for the fall.

This type of event also could be adapted for other purposes. For example, it could be used to conduct enrollment drives for the Children's Health Insurance Program. Federal and state agencies could hold a conference in a central location and invite a host of community-based human services and children's advocacy organizations, both to strategize on best practices and pick up printed materials. ■

David Sayen is administrator for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Region 9, based in San Francisco.