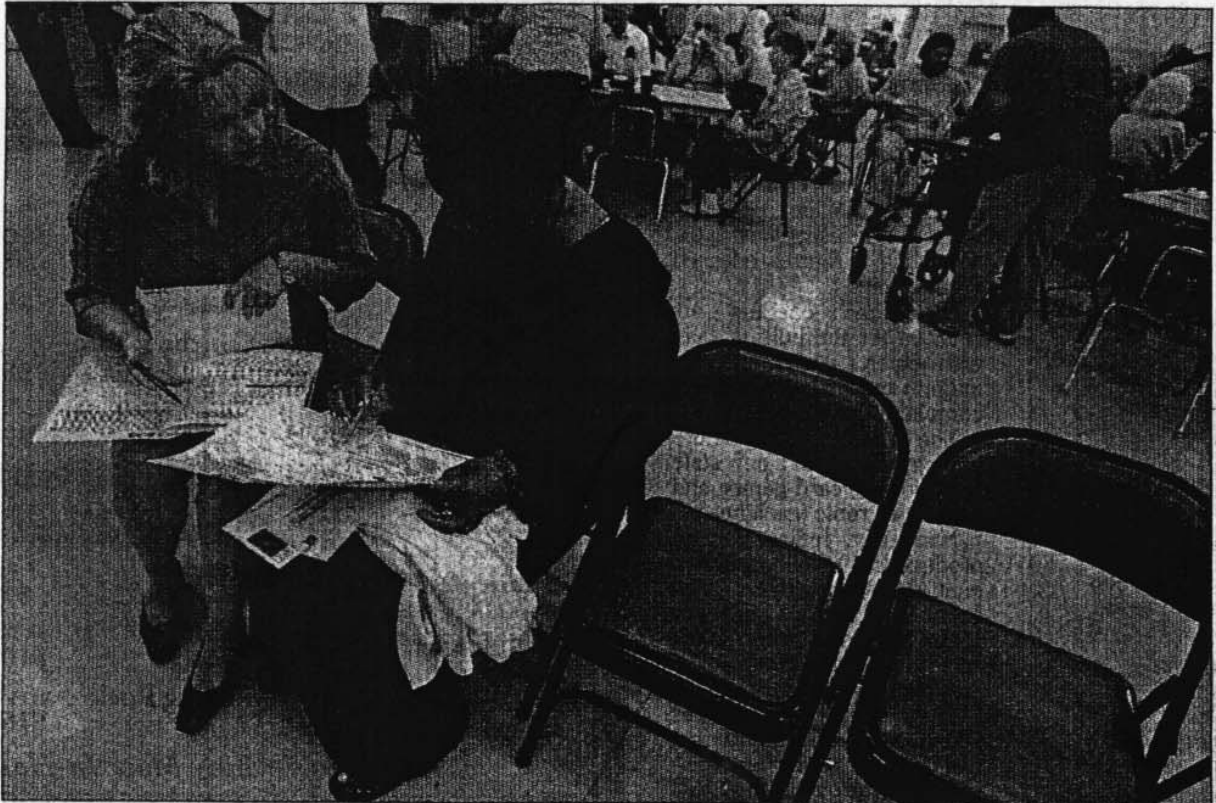


Face-to-face with Medicare



BY JACONNA AGUIRRE, THE OKLAHOMAN

Volunteer Cindi Fleshman helps Flora Burns of Oklahoma City with the Medicare sign-up process for prescription drug benefits Wednesday at the Mayfair Center, 3200 NW 48.

Seniors get information on prescription benefits

By Jim Killackey, Staff Writer

More than 1,000 senior citizens moved through the Mayfair Center in Oklahoma City on Wednesday as they digested facts and figures about the far-reaching and complex new Medicare prescription drug benefits program starting Jan. 1.

About 200 people were in line at 9 a.m., an hour before health authorities were ready to start the program.

Many wore oversized sunglasses and wide-brimmed hats; some used wheelchairs, walkers and canes. Because of the crush, seniors were let in the doors at 9:15 a.m. at the Mayfair complex, 3200 NW 48.

Federal officials selected Mayfair, a former elementary school, as the nation's first site for a pilot program of face-to-face interviews about the new drug benefit and opportunities for low-income seniors needing financial assistance to cover the program's premiums.

Mayfair was chosen because it has had an established adult day care center for 18 years.

Wednesday's enthusiastic turnout earned an A+ from health officials who want to expand the program.

Locations, including others in Oklahoma, will be

DID YOU KNOW



How Oklahoma benefits

- Oklahoma has 550,000 Medicare beneficiaries.
- On average, Medicare is expected to pay \$4,189 a year for people receiving low-income assistance.
- Low-income Oklahomans now can apply for extra financial aid to pay for prescription drug benefits under Medicare. Other Medicare recipients can apply starting Nov. 15. Medicare's new prescription drug benefits program becomes effective Jan. 1.

"This clearly has worked," said Jeffrey Kelman, a medical officer for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in Washington.

"Mayfair has deep community roots," Kelman said. "It's a place where complex benefits can be explained face-to-face."

That opinion was echoed by local Social Security representative Larry G. Jones.

Benefits

Continued from Page 9A

"Oklahomans from this older generation don't want to use a computer or a telephone," Jones said. "They trust eye-to-eye, one-on-one conversations."

Claud M. Ellis, 67, and friend Henry Washington, 74, are battling prostate cancer and other ailments. They attended the event because the escalating costs of prescription drugs are constant concerns.

If Ellis bought all the prescriptions he needed, the cost would be about \$21,000 a year, he said.

Ellis said he'll have enough money to buy \$9,600 worth of prescription medications this year. He said he has cut back on a doctor-prescribed chemotherapy drug.

Retired from the Army, Washington said he has to pick and choose between food and prescription drugs.

"Life's become very painful," he said. "I don't know from month to month if I'll have enough money for everything."

Eldercare advocate Clara Haas said too many Oklahoma seniors don't sign up for government benefits because they're fearful they won't qualify. Most don't have computers, Haas said, and they worry about doing anything that could open them up to identity theft.

Mary Smart, 79, attended the Medicare conference but doubted she will sign up for any prescription drug benefits.

"The Lord will take care of me," Smart said.

Vivian Smith, 84, said many seniors "desperately need help in dealing with issues of prescription drugs and their high costs."

"With prices going up and up and up, many older Oklahomans are simply going without the prescription drugs they need," Smith said. "Many of the newest drugs could help us, but we don't get them because of the high costs."