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March 2016



MMW and AgeOptions Get National Recognition for Advocacy that Enabled Medicare Advantage Members to Avoid Losing Access to Their Doctors

Readers of dozens of newspapers around the country in March learned about a little-known Medicare Advantage special enrollment alternative and how Erin Weir, AgeOptions manager of Health Care Access, advocated for a group of Medicare beneficiaries to be allowed to use it to change plans when their doctors withdrew from the plan they had signed up for.

The story can be read on the [NPR website](#) and [Kaiser Health News](#).

Members of Medicare Advantage plans are restricted to their plan's provider network and usually can change plans only during the open enrollment period each fall. There are exceptions, but losing a provider was not among them until the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) issued rules that took effect in 2015 granting members a special enrollment period to change plans if there was a "significant" change in their current plan.

In December, it was Erin's knowledge of this rule, along with the work of Champaign County Health Care Consumers, that ultimately enabled members of a Medicare Advantage plan in Champaign, Douglas and Vermillion counties to choose new plans and keep their doctors – many of whom they had relied on for decades.

AgeOptions.

1048 Lake Street, Suite 300
Oak Park, IL 60301-1102

phone (708)383-0258
fax (708)524-0870

(800)699-9043
ageoptions.org



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MMW team members (from left) Alicia Donegan and Georgia Gerdes, health care choices specialists, and Erin Weir, manager of health care access

Just days before the end of the 2015 Open Enrollment, five of those members received letters from their doctors saying they were dropping out of their plan's network. They contacted Jen Tayabji, a benefits counselor with Champaign County Health Care Consumers and a member of the Make Medicare Work Coalition (MMW), which is coordinated in part by AgeOptions. She realized the

members would not have enough time to compare alternative plans and enroll in one that covered their doctors or other physicians within a reasonable distance before the deadline. Concerned that they and others were going to lose access to their doctors, Jen called Erin.

Erin was aware of the new rule, and she and the AgeOptions Health Care Choices staff worked with Champaign County Health Care Consumers to gather information from clients. They made the case to the CMS regional office in Chicago and advocated for CMS to grant the five beneficiaries a special opportunity to change their plan, as well as for a special enrollment period for everyone affected, which CMS agreed to this spring.

"We were able to do this because of our ongoing advocacy," Erin said. "Our relationships with our MMW members enable us to monitor health care access issues that consumers are experiencing, and our relationships with state and federal government entities enable us to advocate for system changes to improve those access issues."



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MMW is a statewide collaboration to promote access to affordable health care options in Illinois. It is led by AgeOptions, Health & Disability Advocates and Progress Center for Independent Living. With support from the Retirement Research Foundation, the Michael Reese Health Trust and the Chicago Community Trust, MMW provides materials, training and technical assistance to



MMW team members Gaby Montoya, outreach and information specialist; Stephanie Balog, information and assistance specialist; and Peggy Tully, health care and fraud information specialist

professionals serving older adults and people with disabilities in Illinois to enable them to help their clients gain access to critical health care and prescription drug services and supports.

With its statewide reach, MMW is able to monitor the experiences of older persons and people with disabilities in Illinois and advocate to make health care programs more accessible in terms of cost, navigation and services. “We do this with a number of different issues,” Erin said, “and we’re always looking for stories and information about what’s going on. We encourage people to contact us.”

MMW welcomes new members. The coalition provides training and materials for professionals who assist older adults and people with disabilities with health care options. “We’re here to support them and we want them to engage with us, to let us know what they’re seeing and help us advocate,” Erin said.



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For more information on the Make Medicare Work Coalition, and to join, please visit the [MMW website](#). Additional information about MMW's work is in the [AgeOptions 2014 Annual Report](#).

MMW is planning to honor Jen Tayabji for bringing the plight of the Advantage plan members to Erin's attention, and in April AgeOptions and Erin will be recognized in Champaign County for making a difference in the lives of people in the region.