

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

October 30, 2006

Ms. Leslie Norwalk
Acting Commissioner
Medicare and Medicaid Services
United States Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Ms. Norwalk:

We are writing to express our strong opposition to the closing of the Walk-In Center at the Empire Medicare Service Center, located on 800 Second Avenue in Manhattan. Empire Medicare is a contractor of the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and we understand that CMS informed them that the budget for beneficiary walk-in services needed to be cut, necessitating the closing of the Walk-In Center. It is extremely troubling that CMS would eliminate this essential customer service center for those who need it the most.

Our offices have been inundated with phone calls from doctors, beneficiaries, and families who will be seriously impacted by the closing of this outreach center. As you know, the Center provides a vital service for senior citizens and disabled individuals who are facing confusing choices about the Medicare prescription drug program, have experienced problems with Medicare, or have language barriers that make it difficult for them to resolve problems. These beneficiaries will now be forced to use the 1-800-Medicare hotline, which is no substitute for caring professionals, many of whom have decades of experience with the program in this community.

We believe that closing this facility will seriously undermine the quality of service provided to Medicare beneficiaries. According to the New York Department for the Aging, roughly 40% of New York State's seniors live in New York City and because this walk-in center is the only one of its kind in the New York Metropolitan area, it serves 5,000 -7,000 New Yorkers every year from all five boroughs. With such a large portion of the elderly population residing in the New York Metropolitan area, it is vital to have a center that they can visit to obtain assistance in resolving their Medicare concerns.

Instead of providing a full-service facility, Empire Medicare will reportedly be encouraging the elderly to use self-service technology such as a 1-800 number and the internet. However, we are concerned that New York's Medicare beneficiaries, their families, and health care providers will be unable to get their needs met with these distance technologies which many do not have access to, and that are already overwhelmed by those attempting to sort through the Medicare prescription drug benefit. Further, these problems can be exacerbated by illness or


disability. In fact, the State Department for the Aging reports that nearly 30% of the City's elderly have a sensory disability, while 30% have a mental disability.

As you know, New York City has one of the most diverse senior populations in the country. We understand that roughly 20% of the individuals serviced by the Center do not speak English and thus, require bilingual caseworkers. We are concerned that without the services provided by the Center, these individuals will not receive the benefits to which they are entitled.


While seniors will still be able to access New York State Health Insurance Information, Counseling and Assistance Program (HICAP) volunteers with their questions, these individuals do not have the technical expertise of the Empire Medicare Service Center employees and need to be supplemented by trained Medicare customer service representatives.


The decision to close the Walk-In Center on Second Avenue is short-sighted and harmful to our constituents. We urge you to reconsider the decision and look forward to working with you to resolve this problem without interruption in these critical services for New York's Medicare beneficiaries.

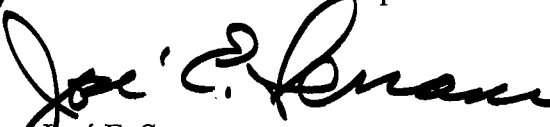
Sincerely,

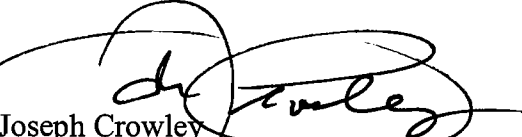

Hillary Rodham Clinton
United States Senate



Carolyn B. Maloney
United States House of Representatives


Jerrold Nadler
United States House of Representatives


Anthony D. Weiner
United States House of Representatives


José E. Serrano
United States House of Representatives


Joseph Crowley
United States House of Representatives


Michael R. McNulty
United States House of Representatives