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November 1, 2006

Ms. Leslie Norwalk
Administrator
Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services
7500 Security Boulevard, C5-11-24
Baltimore, MD 21244

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. Many of our offices have been inundated with phone calls from doctors, beneficiaries, and families who are outraged at 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. We understand that 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. Empire Medicare is a contractor of the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and we understand that CMS informed Empire Medicare 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.

We believe that the closing of this facility will seriously undermine the quality of service provided by Empire Medicare. Because this walk-in center is the only one of its kind in the New York Metropolitan Area, this facility serves constituents from across the New York Region. Serving 5,000 to 7,000 people every year from all five boroughs, this facility is an essential resource for New York's seniors. According to the New York City Department for the Aging, roughly 40% of New York State's seniors live in New York City. With such a large portion of the elderly population residing here, it is vital to have a center that they can visit to obtain help with 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 the 1-800 number and the internet. We understand that the Medicare hotline has been plagued with misinformation and poor customer service. Two reports by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the Medicare program, through the 1-800-Medicare hotline, has been unable to provide accurate information to beneficiaries. The GAO found that the Medicare hotline provided inaccurate, inappropriate or incomplete answers to one third of basic questions. Further, we are concerned that Medicare beneficiaries will be unable to navigate the confusing and

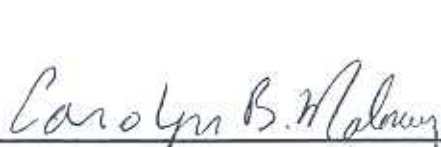
intimidating phone and computer service that the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services provides. These distance technologies cannot provide the type of assistance seniors really need, cannot help someone see or complete a form, cannot help someone find information in a pile of documents and they are unlikely to help anyone who is of diminished capacity or who has difficulty communicating. Further, a significant portion of the elderly, particularly those who are low income, do not know how to use the internet. Others cannot hear well enough to use the telephone. In fact, the NYC 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, and the service provided by the Center has been essential for elderly immigrants. 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.

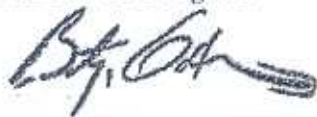
Finally, Medicare Part D is an extremely confusing program that offers seniors an overwhelming range of choices. While the program's initial enrollment period is closed, newly eligible individuals will face the same dizzying range of choices. Furthermore, enrolled seniors will find that their current plans do not cover their prescriptions adequately and will need help identifying more appropriate plans. Additionally, with the adjustment of Medicare Part B premiums to be based upon income next year, there will likely be mass confusion surrounding this adjustment. Without the Center, many seniors will not be able to have their problems resolved. While seniors will still be able to reach out to the New York State Health Insurance Information, Counseling and Assistance Program (HICAP) volunteers with their questions, these individuals do not have the technical expertise of Empire Medicare Service Center employees and need to be supplemented by trained Medicare customer service representatives. HICAP's volunteers are simply not a substitute for trained Medicare professionals.

In conclusion, we believe 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 hope that we can work with you to re-open this center as soon as possible.

Sincerely,



CAROLYN B. MALONEY
Member of Congress



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Public Advocate



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