

Statement of Congressman Gene Green
Press Conference: Coalition to End the Two-Year Wait for Medicare
November 12, 2008

I am pleased to be here today in conjunction with the Medicare Rights Center to announce the launch of the Coalition to End the Two-Year Wait for Medicare.

The coalition is a group of more than 75 health advocacy groups who want Congress to take action during the 111th session to end the 24 month waiting period disabled individuals under 65 must endure before they become eligible for Medicare.

When Medicare expanded in 1972 to include individuals with significant disabilities, Congress stipulated that people with disabilities must first receive Social Security Disability Insurance for 24 months before gaining Medicare eligibility, which is a three step process.

First, the Social Security Administration must make a determination of Social Security Disability Insurance approval.

Second, individuals with disabilities must wait five-months before receiving Social Security Disability Insurance benefits.

Finally, after receiving their Social Security Disability Insurance benefits, individuals must wait an *additional* 24 months before they receive Medicare coverage.

The 24 month waiting period affects approximately 1.5 million people.

Most individuals in the waiting period who become disabled were, before their disability, are working full-time jobs and paying into Medicare like all other employed Americans.

Unfortunately, many individuals stuck in the waiting period cannot afford to buy individual insurance because of their preexisting conditions or if they can obtain this insurance it is far too expensive.

Additionally, most cannot afford COBRA premiums to maintain coverage from their former employer.

Therefore, nearly 40 percent of individuals stuck in the 24 month waiting period are without health insurance coverage at some point during their wait for Medicare and nearly 26 percent have no health insurance during this entire period.

As a result, many individuals do not seek medical treatment and often stop taking medications. This is especially risky because these individuals are already in poor condition and it makes their conditions more costly to treat when they finally qualify for Medicare coverage.

To address the issue of making people who are newly qualified as disabled and under age 65 wait two years before receiving Medicare coverage, I sponsored a bill, the Ending the Medicare Disability Waiting Period Act. In the Senate, Senator Jeff Bingaman introduced the companion version of this bill.

The Ending Medicare Disability Waiting Period will phase out, over 10 years, the two-year waiting period for people with disabilities to become eligible for Medicare benefit. It will also eliminate the waiting period for individuals with life-threatening conditions.

I have introduced the Ending Medicare Disability Waiting Period Act for several years. Each year we hear from more and more people who are stuck in the 24 month waiting period and have no health insurance.

These individuals have been pushed to the financial brink and in some instances forced to declare bankruptcy.

We have also heard stories of individuals stuck in the waiting period who pass away before they even qualify for disability coverage under Medicare.

As we move towards a new Congress and a new administration, I am hopeful we will include the Ending Medicare Disability Waiting Period Act in any health care reform discussion we have.

I am also looking forward to working with the Coalition to End the Two-Year Wait for Medicare on this issue and hope we will be successful in our efforts to raise awareness of this issue and even pass legislation.

Again, thank you for having me here today.