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**CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES**  
**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

239 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515  
(202) 225-5065

39300 CIVIC CENTER DRIVE, SUITE 220  
FREMONT, CA 94538  
(510) 494-1388

PETEMAIL@MAIL.HOUSE.GOV

September 25, 2007

The Honorable David M. Walker  
Comptroller General of the United States  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

Providing quality services to all beneficiaries is an essential component of the Medicare program. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has emphasized that improving its communications with beneficiaries is an important goal.

Past reports—including some from GAO—have, however, raised concerns about the quality of the information provided to beneficiaries who contact Medicare call centers with questions. For example, in December 2004 you reported on problems associated with the completeness and accuracy of information provided by these call centers. In May 2006 you reported similar concerns with call center responses to beneficiaries who had questions about the then new Part D benefit. Both reports demonstrated that CMS had a long way to go to provided beneficiaries with important and much needed information.

Although I continue to remain concerned with the completeness and accuracy of information provided to beneficiaries who contact these call centers, I am also troubled by recent reports that suggest the level of customer service is inadequate. These reports note that beneficiaries are waiting long periods of time on hold before reaching a customer service representative (CSR) and that some are having difficulty reaching a CSR who can assist them, especially if English is not their first language.

It is my understanding that CMS has recently changed the contractor operating these calls centers.

Given the involvement of a new contractor, I am now interested in an assessment that would explore the key aspects of the call centers' customer service. This assessment should feature an evaluation of both caller wait times and the ability of the centers to assist non-English speaking callers. It should also assess the accuracy and completeness of call center responses and include any other elements of customer service that you consider important.

As part of your assessment, I ask that you also review CMS's oversight of these call centers.

Your assistance in this matter is greatly appreciated. If you or your staff has any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Marci Harris of my staff at (202) 225-5065.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pete Stark". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Pete Stark  
Chairman