

## **ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS**

### **Good job**

#### **Alaska seniors might get relief from Medicare's low doctor fees**

*(06/27/08 00:28:37)*

Help may be on the way for Alaska senior citizens who can't find primary care doctors who'll treat them.

Most Alaska primary care doctors are not accepting patients on Medicare, the government funded health insurance for those 65 and over. They say Medicare imposes doctor fees that are so low, they can't afford to treat the elderly.

But our congressional delegation got a 35 percent permanent increase for Alaska doctors written into a Medicare bill that passed the House Tuesday.

They deserve credit for their efforts.

The increase should end the disgraceful situation in which older Alaskans can't even find a regular doctor.

U.S. Rep. Don Young voted for the bill, even though President Bush has threatened to veto it.

Unlike past measures that have temporarily raised Medicare payments in Alaska, "This is a permanent fix, not one will expire in a few months," Young said in a statement. "This is a great day for Alaska's seniors."

Now the measure goes to the Senate.

Congress must complete work on Medicare bills in the next few days to avoid a programmed 10.6 percent cut in doctor payments nationwide beginning July 1.

With Congress working to stave off that cut, our delegation saw the chance to bring Medicare's doctor fees in Alaska closer to reasonable levels. Sen. Ted Stevens first introduced the 35 percent increase for Alaska on the Senate side, and it was picked up in the House bill, said a spokesman for Rep. Young.

The Senate has yet to pass any of different versions of the Medicare repair bill though. It is still fighting over how to pay for increases.

The pending bills, if passed, will encourage Alaska doctors to open up their practices to Medicare patients, said Jim Jordan, executive director of the Alaska State Medical Association.

That's what happened before when payment rates increased in Alaska.

But this latest fix doesn't cure the basic problem with Medicare. It leaves in place the system of regularly scheduled payment decreases that take an act of Congress to stave off.

It's going to take a new president and new Congress to do the major overhaul that Medicare needs.

**BOTTOM LINE:** A helpful Medicare bill has passed the House. Hang on for imminent action in the Senate.