

Study identifies problems with Medicare program hotline.

[CQ](#) (9/12, Carey) reports, "With the annual Medicare drug benefit enrollment period set to begin Nov. 15, Congress on Thursday warned federal officials to correct problems with a toll-free phone line millions of beneficiaries use to obtain information about the Medicare program." Complaints about the phone line include "long waits," receiving "wrong information," static, "confusing" menus, and "that calls are routinely dropped." But, Sen. Gordon H. Smith (R-Ore.), ranking member of the Senate Aging Committee, "said the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has made many improvements to the 1-800 Medicare line but that serious problems persist." Sen. Smith's staff made "500 test calls...to the Medicare line," and identified similar problems to those that were reported to "the Government Accountability Office and the Department of Health and Human Services Inspector General." Acting CMS Administrator Kerry Weems noted that the agency is making "several changes to the 1-800-Medicare line that should be operational within the next year."

Those changes include "new training programs" and an improved "automated system for identifying callers' eligibility for benefits," [Dow Jones Newswires](#) (9/12, Yoest) adds. The hotline is run by Vangent Inc., an independent contractor. John "Mac" Curtis, president and CEO of Vangent, told the aging committee "that customer surveys showed that 85 percent of callers were satisfied with the program and that most callers have just one issue to discuss during their calls, rather than multiple issues posed by Senate staff members during their test calls." The [Wall Street Journal's](#) (9/11, Goldstein) Health Blog also covered the story.