

## YOUR HEALTH

# Volunteers on Prowl For Medicare Fraud

**W**OULD YOU like to help the government fight Medicare fraud or, at the very least, help other seniors navigate the complex program? If so, you can become a volunteer in the Senior Medicare Patrol. Or, if you think you're a target of a Medicare scam, you can call in the patrol for help.

Every state has its own Senior Medicare Patrol program, which is funded by the U.S. Administration on Aging. The patrol's primary goal is to teach beneficiaries and others how to spot and report possible Medicare fraud, but the patrols also assist beneficiaries with routine matters, such as identifying errors on Medicare bills. Many volunteers are retirees.

Pat Macholl, 66, a retired TV research director, became a volunteer three years ago. She now volunteers about 10 to 20 hours a month for the Senior Medicare Patrol in Oakland, Cal. "I have helped people figure out their Medicare summary notices, correct mistakes about their enrollment, file appeals for claims that were denied, and report fraud or suspected fraud," she says.

As a result of the work by Senior Medicare Patrols and of consumer calls to Medicare, more than 45,000 inquiries were sent to law enforcement for fraud investigations in 2012 alone. Go to [www.smpresource.org](http://www.smpresource.org) for information about patrols and volunteer opportunities in your state.

### Seniors Trained as Fraud Detectors

The program started in a few states in 1997 after government officials came to realize that a Medicare beneficiary's billing statement could hold evidence of fraud. Scam artists often get someone's Medicare number and then bill the government directly for services or equipment that the beneficiary doesn't receive. Beneficiaries typically don't see the initial bill.

But there are some clues of fraud in the beneficiary's quarterly Medicare summary notice, which lists all of the services and supplies that providers bill to Medicare during that period. Scam artists know that many people don't pay attention to details on the notice if the bill is paid in full by Medicare.

Reviewing these notices is a key way to identify possible fraud. Micki Nozaki, a case specialist and volun-



A Florida volunteer tells a senior how to spot Medicare fraud.

teer coordinator with the California Senior Medicare Patrol, describes one scam and the role of the beneficiary and patrol in uncovering it.

In 2007, a man in California responded to an ad from a doctor for free services and equipment. He gave his Medicare number and other personal information at the doctor's office, and personnel drew blood and gave him medical supplies. The Medicare summary notice that he received a few weeks later included a long list of services and items that he never received.

He contacted the California patrol, which sent the information to law enforcement officials. After investigators studied this and similar reports, they uncovered a fraud ring that had billed the government for more than \$5 million in bogus claims. "They fly under the radar for years, and it's so hard to find these people and even harder to prove fraud," Nozaki says. In 2013, she says, the California patrol is expected to help Medicare recoup more than \$7 million.

Patrol volunteers give presentations at community events to educate beneficiaries on how to identify potential fraud or errors and to alert people to scams. "We tell people to keep a diary listing when they go to the doctor or the lab or equipment supplier," Nozaki says. A beneficiary should compare the diary against the Medicare notice. At times, a beneficiary could face problems getting medical equipment if a false billing indicates the item was already received.

When people see a suspicious charge, they should first contact the provider. "It could be an error or misplaced code, or they could have been billed for someone else's service," says Makeba Huntington-Symons, the Florida patrol's manager. "But if the answer they get isn't the answer they need and it still seems fishy, then they contact us." ❧ —KIMBERLY LANKFORD