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**Low Income Beneficiaries May Lose Help  
With Medicare Premiums**

**WASHINGTON** -- Unless the Senate acts this week to pass H.R. 6331, the National Council on Aging (NCOA) fears that low-income Medicare beneficiaries, people who are already struggling with increased food and gasoline costs, may lose an important benefit. The House recently passed the bill by an overwhelming bipartisan margin.

Currently, 1.5 million people with Medicare can receive help in paying Medicare Part B premiums, which have more than doubled since 2000, under the Qualifying Individual (QI) program, But the QI program is in jeopardy, as it is due to expire on July 1<sup>st</sup>. The QI program pays Medicare Part B premiums for beneficiaries with incomes between 120 percent and 135 percent of the federal poverty level (annual incomes from \$12,480 to \$14,040 for singles).

"This means that people with Medicare with incomes below \$14,000 may be forced to pay over \$1,100 per year to Medicare," said Howard Bedlin, NCOA Vice President for Public Policy and Advocacy. "Do we really want poor beneficiaries to no longer be able to afford to see their doctors?"

"It's hard to believe that Congress would cut off vulnerable beneficiaries from the help they need at such a critical time," added Bedlin. "Without an extension, hundreds of thousands of people currently getting help will be sent disenrollment letters. The result will be confusion, fear, and uncertainty. This disruption can all be avoided by the prompt passage of H.R. 6331."

The Alabama Medicaid office has reportedly informed the 15,500 current QI recipients that their benefits will end Monday. Other state offices have likely done the same.

In addition to extending the QI program, H.R. 6331 makes additional, long-overdue improvements:

- Providing a modest increase in asset eligibility levels (currently just \$4,000 for singles), which have never been adjusted to reflect inflation;
- Increasing community resources to find and enroll low-income beneficiaries;
- Translating application forms into other languages; and
- Enlisting the Social Security Administration to help with enrollment.

The QI program is a federal grant to states that pays the Medicare Part B premium – currently \$96.40 per month. It was created through the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 for a five-year period and has been extended on a year-to-year basis since December 2002.

NCOA is a national leader in finding and enrolling seniors in benefits programs.

*Founded in 1950, the National Council on Aging (NCOA) has a mission is to improve the lives of older Americans. A non-profit organization with 3,700 members, we also have a national network of some 14,000 organizations and leaders that help us in our work. NCOA members include senior centers, area agencies on aging, faith-based service organizations, senior housing facilities, employment services, consumer groups and leaders from academia, business and labor. Our programs help older people remain healthy and independent, find jobs, access benefits programs, and discover meaningful ways to continue contributing to society.*