

FRIDAY ALERT



Alliance for Retired Americans

815 16th Street, NW, Fourth Floor • Washington, DC 20006

202.637.5399 • www.retiredamericans.org • arafridayalert@retiredamericans.org

May 16, 2008

Advertising, Better Treatments Lead to Greatest Use of Prescription Drugs Ever

For the first time, it appears that more than half of all insured Americans are taking prescription medicines regularly for chronic health problems, a new study shows. Medco Health Solutions Inc., which manages prescription benefits for about one in five Americans, issued the report. According to the research, cited by the Associated Press, the most widely used drugs are those to lower high blood pressure and cholesterol - problems often linked to heart disease, obesity and diabetes. Three out of four people 65 or older use medication for a chronic problem. Experts say the data reflect not just worsening public health but better medicines for chronic conditions and more aggressive treatment by doctors. The pharmaceutical industry's relentless advertising is also seen as a major factor. Medco's data show that last year, 51% of American children and adults were taking one or more prescription drugs for a chronic condition, up from 50% the previous four years and 47% in 2001. The company examined prescription records from 2001 to 2007 of a representative sample of 2.5 million customers, from newborns to the elderly. On the positive side, researchers have turned what used to be fatal diseases into chronic ones, including AIDS, some cancers, and hemophilia. "If drug companies spent less on advertising and people were healthier, this might be good news," said **Edward Coyle**, Executive Director of the Alliance. "But given today's advertising totals, this story is further proof of a drug industry out of control."

Drug Companies to Spend Millions Lobbying at Political Conventions

According to *Politico*, the pharmaceutical industry will spend upward of \$500,000 lobbying politicians and skirting the new rules created by Congress to limit such activity at the national nominating conventions in Denver and Minneapolis-St. Paul. While ethics restrictions prohibit congressional campaign committees from receiving soft money contributions, the Democratic and Republican governors associations are not bound by the same rules as federal lawmakers and groups. Capitalizing on this loophole, drug companies such as Merck and AstraZeneca are expected to give \$250,000 to the association of each party. Given recent scrutiny of the pharmaceutical industry, the companies are seeking to spend millions of dollars to influence politicians outside the Beltway and draw less negative attention to themselves. In exchange for their contributions, drug industry lobbyists and executives will receive tickets to parties and other special events where they will have the opportunity to mingle with elected officials.

Colorado Alliance Wins Repeal of Local Grocery Tax

The Colorado Alliance won a three-month battle Monday night, when the Lakewood City Council unanimously voted to eliminate a two-cents-per dollar grocery sales tax and offset the lost revenue by rescinding a temporary sales tax waiver given to a local Wal-Mart and shopping center. The decision adheres to the recommendations of a seven-person committee formed in November to research the issue; Colorado Alliance President **Frank Lay** was appointed by the Mayor to serve

on this panel as a representative of community seniors. At the same time, the Colorado Alliance worked with other Lakewood citizens to mount a petition urging a repeal of the food tax. "Retirees in Colorado and around the country are struggling to afford groceries on fixed incomes," said **Ruben Burks**, Secretary-Treasurer of the Alliance. "This action will help all the seniors and low-income residents of Lakewood afford their everyday needs, and sets an important precedent as the Colorado Alliance takes their fight to communities across the state." To let the national Alliance know about success stories from your state, email ARAFRIDAYALERT@retiredamericans.org.

Alliance Seniors Help Rite Aid Workers Win Union Election

In March, two years after they began organizing to join the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, workers at Rite Aid's distribution center in Lancaster, California won a National Labor Relations Board election. Alliance members from Hawaii, Washington, and Oregon wrote letters of support and encouragement to the Rite-Aid workers. They also wrote protest letters to the company's CEO, responding to reports that, since March, Rite Aid has fired five active union supporters, suspended and disciplined six, and harassed many more. After overcoming such adversity, the workers in Lancaster will continue to seek the support of labor and community allies and Rite Aid customers - many of whom are seniors - as they prepare to start bargaining for their first contract. "I am so proud of our Alliance members for looking out for their brothers and sisters. This is yet another example of lifelong activism," said **George J. Kourpias**, President of the Alliance.

Not Too Late to File for Economic Stimulus Rebate Check

Although April 15 has passed, it is not too late to file a tax return in order to collect your stimulus rebate check. Up to 20 million Americans who rely primarily on Social Security income qualify for a check from the federal government. Even seniors who do not earn income through current employment can qualify for a stimulus check, if their Social Security benefits, Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits, and railroad retirement benefits totaled at least \$3,000 in 2007. In most cases, retirees will receive an economic stimulus check ranging from \$300 to \$600. Seniors need to file a 2007 federal tax return on IRS Form 1040 or 1040A (short form) to receive the check. Seniors must file a 2007 tax return even if their income is normally low enough that they were not required to file in previous years. Those who qualify for a stimulus check will receive one by the end of 2008, as long as they file by October 15, 2008 - but no rebate checks will be issued after 2008.

Southern Regional Meeting Just Around the Corner

The Alliance will hold its fourth and final regional meeting, the Southern Regional Meeting, on June 4-5, 2008 in Orlando, Florida. The conference will provide a forum to work with other activists in the region to learn how to increase grassroots advocacy, get seniors and retirees registered and voting, and educate federal, state and local legislators on the issues that concern retirees. For copies of the official registration form, call 1-888-373-6497, email **Joni Jones** at jjones@retiredamericans.org, or visit our website at www.retiredamericans.org.