

# Letter to the Secretary: September 28-30, 2006, Devils Lake, North Dakota

November 6, 2006

The Honorable Michael M. Leavitt  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Ave, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Leavitt,

I would like to share with you findings from our most recent field meeting in Devils Lake, North Dakota, September 28-30, 2006. During the recent meeting, the Committee continued to finalize the 2007 report, which we expect to send to you as soon as possible. The meeting in North Dakota afforded the Committee another chance to get a local perspective on the three topics that make up this year's report: Medicare Advantage, Head Start, and Substance Abuse.

During this meeting, the Committee also heard a presentation about the Rural Assistance Center (RAC), which is funded by your Department. As you may recall, the RAC is one of the byproducts of the work of the HHS Rural Task Force. The Task Force produced a 2003 report "One Department: Serving Rural America," which recommended the creation of a single web-based portal to help rural residents learn more about rural health issues and available public and private grant and funding opportunities. The RAC has seen tremendous growth over the past three years and has become a valuable national resource. At the same time, many members of the Committee believe more must be done to promote this important rural resource, and we urge the Department of Health and Human Services to play a larger role in the promotion of RAC to rural communities.

The Committee also heard from a variety of health and human service providers who provided valuable feedback on each of the chapters for the upcoming 2007 report. In particular, the Committee was impressed by the efforts of the Towner County Medical Center in Cando, North Dakota, to create a residential drug treatment center that is drawing clients from all over the upper Midwest. It uses an innovative treatment approach that is clearly yielding benefits, not only for the patients but also for the local community.

Finally, the Committee was impressed by the work of one of its site hosts, the University of North Dakota, which is a great example of a research university taking to heart its mission of service. The University's programs and outreach efforts play a key role in supporting health and human service delivery in North Dakota. It is home to the only medical school in North Dakota, whose graduates supply much of the health care workforce in rural North Dakota.

We hope to get this year's report to you earlier than in the past because we believe the report contains information and analysis that are timely. In particular, we would call your attention to the Committee's focus on the new Medicare Advantage program and the unique challenges and potential problems facing rural health care providers and the beneficiaries they serve.

The Committee will meet again February 28 through March 2, 2007. I hope that you or a representative will be able to address the Committee. The Committee celebrates its 20th year in 2007 and anticipates next year's report will look back at what has happened during past two decades with an eye towards key challenges that are expected to affect rural communities in the coming years.

Sincerely,

David M. Beasley, Chair