The Nation's Voice on Mental Illness

June 30, 2005

The Honorable Ben Cardin
The Honorable Jim Ramstad
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives Cardin & Ramstad:

On behalf of the 210,000 members and 1,200 affiliates of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), I am writing to express our strong support for your legislation to repeal the current-law exclusion of coverage of benzodiazapenes from the upcoming Medicare's prescription drug benefit. As the nation's largest organization representing individuals with severe mental illnesses and their families, NAMI is pleased to support this important legislation.

As you know, under the Medicare Modernization Act (MMA), benzodiazepines are among several classes of medications that – by law – must be excluded from coverage under the Part D drug benefit. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has issued guidelines clarifying that Medicare drug plans *may* cover benzodiazepines as part of a supplemental coverage option, and that states *may* continue to cover these medications under Medicaid. While this is helpful, these options nonetheless create administrative problems and represent at best, an incomplete solution.

Benzodiazepines are commonly prescribed and widely used for treatment of anxiety, acute mania in bipolar disorder, seizures and other serious medical conditions. The categorical exclusion of benzodiazepines makes no sense from a clinical or public health perspective, and in fact may cause serious problems for Medicare beneficiaries living with serious mental illness. NAMI is therefore pleased to support this important legislation. We look forward to working with you to ensure that this inequitable and counterproductive exclusion from Part D coverage is corrected.

Thank you for your leadership on this important issue for Medicare beneficiaries with severe mental illnesses and their families.

Sincerely,

Michael J. Fitzpatrick, M.S.W.
Executive Director

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