

Increase Medicare's eligibility age and African Americans Lose

Written by A. Barry Rand

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“For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.”

- H.L. Mencken

Wrong. The proposal to raise Medicare's eligibility age from 65 to 67 in 2014 is wrong. Who stands to gain by this approach? Not the government. Not current and future seniors. And most definitely not older African Americans and other older minorities – these groups stand to lose the most.

Raising the Medicare eligibility age would actually cost much more than it would save, in dollars and in quality of life. A Kaiser Family Foundation study found the proposal would save the federal government \$5.7 billion in 2014, but at the same time impose id="mce_marker"1.4 billion more in spending on individuals, employers and state governments.

Our goal must be to strengthen Medicare, not weaken it. Reducing costs for Medicare and the health care system overall are critical to making the most effective use of our resources and decreasing the economic burden to consumers, providers, insurers, the government – anyone with skin in this game. And really, it's not a game. Raising the Medicare eligibility age doesn't move us forward; it takes us back and weakens one of the most successful fail-safes ever created in the U.S.

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More than 50 million older Americans and individuals with disabilities rely on Medicare for their health security. But if implemented, raising the eligibility age to 67 would immediately restrict access to care – seven million 65 and 66 year olds would lose eligibility.

These would-be beneficiaries would be thrust into the higher premium world of the private insurance market, a market most would be ill-equipped to afford. Already, the majority of people 65+ live on annual fixed incomes in the range of \$20,000. That amount is lower for women and even lower for minority women. According to Kaiser, about two-thirds of the 65 and 66 year olds who get private insurance would pay an average of \$2,200 more each year. How much more will we ask seniors to stretch their fixed incomes?

Raising the eligibility age also means the healthiest of the Medicare cohort would be taken out of the equation, leaving older, less healthy and more costly beneficiaries in place, which would ultimately lead to higher premiums for those remaining in Medicare.

But what makes it worse for African Americans? First, the longevity factor. A key reason proponents support raising the eligibility age is increased life expectancy in the U.S. But African Americans haven't experienced as dramatic an increase as other populations. Especially not African American men – average life expectancy is 70 years compared to 76 years for non-Hispanic Whites. Raising the eligibility age would amount to a major benefit cut for African Americans, who'd potentially have fewer years to collect benefits and therefore, lower lifetime benefits.

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Additionally, older African Americans are more likely to suffer from chronic conditions, pass up care if it's financially out of reach, and have less access to employer-sponsored health insurance compared to non-Hispanic Whites.

Multiple factors play into these challenges, including African Americans' disproportionate representation in lower-wage jobs without benefits, difficulty paying for private insurance with lower-wage incomes, and higher unemployment during harsh economic times. Raising Medicare's eligibility age introduces a cruel new reality into the lives of these seniors – and indeed all seniors.

Unquestionably, raising Medicare's eligibility age would sentence seniors to increased hardship; even destitution for those at greatest risk. This option is certainly not compassionate or caring.

Looking for a quick fix to help reduce the national deficit and avoid the fiscal cliff by raising Medicare's eligibility age is far from a win-win solution. Actually, it's a no-win solution. In fact, it's just wrong. We can do better. We have to do better. The American people are counting on it.

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