

Observation status trends upward: A costly concern for MN seniors

Written by John Michaelson / Minnesota News Connection
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The number of hospital patients being termed under observation is up dramatically, a trend that's catching many senior citizens off guard - and leaving them with hefty medical bills.

Mary Jo George, associate state director of advocacy with AARP Minnesota, says for coverage of some services, Medicare requires a patient to be admitted, and being there with an observation status doesn't count.

"If you do not have a three-day hospital stay, what happens is, the Medicare coverage will not cover your skilled nursing care," she explains. "And so, it is pushed onto the senior, who often has to pay large out-of-pocket costs."

A new [report](#) from AARP shows the use of the observation status by hospitals more than doubled between 2001 and 2009, as did the length of time spent in observation, with visits longer than 48 hours increasing the most.

George explains that the growing use of observation status also raises questions about the quality of care, but she notes that federal legislation has been introduced to remedy the problem.

"One of the bills in Congress is a bipartisan bill," she says. "It would look to say that the observation services would count toward that three-day hospital stay, so therefore, seniors would not have to pay the big out-of-pocket costs if they do need skilled nursing care."

In the meantime, George urges seniors to make sure they're asking questions about their admittance status if they are hospitalized.

And if they have questions, she suggests contacting the Senior Linkage Line - and that includes Medicare beneficiaries who may have experienced this situation in the past.

"Because some of these decisions can be appealed, and seniors can perhaps get their money back," she says. "And the Senior Linkage Line number is 800-333-2433, if somebody has felt that they have not been rightly admitted into the hospital."

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In Minnesota, more than 800,000 people rely on Medicare for their health coverage.