

Retired Salisbury resident Sue Piper, right, listens during a media briefing outlining the AARP's health care reform priorities on Wednesday at MAC Inc. in Salisbury. At left is Matthew Weinstein and at center Loretta Carr. (Matt Gunby photo)

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## AARP says health care reform in 'critical condition'

By Laura D'Alessandr, Staff Writer

SALISBURY -- The health of U.S. citizens is being ignored, according to Rawle Andrews Jr., AARP Maryland interim senior director.

But the AARP is taking a stand, Andrews said, alongside Lee Hammond, AARP board president and a Maryland resident, from the MAC Inc. senior center on Wednesday.



"I don't think there is any doubt the American health care system is in critical condition," Andrews said. "And it sits in a waiting room, waiting for treatment."

Even in light of a recent Massachusetts election which has some speculating the national health care bill will fail, Andrews said AARP will continue to fight for it.

"Ultimately, we will prevail," he said. "It's a question of when, not if."

Republican Senator Scott Brown was elected to represent Massachusetts on Tuesday and is destined to fill the seat held by its long-time Democratic senator, the late Ted Kennedy. Democrats have since issued pledges to stay strong in their fight to pass a health care reform bill. AARP is on board, too. "We will work with both sides of the aisle," Hammond told the group at the MAC center. "We're going to get something done."

Andrews said the number of citizens losing health care coverage is rising daily and aging just as fast, if not faster -- 25 percent of Maryland residents are 50 years of age or older and 750,000 are already on Medicare. But one in four Medicare users fall in the Part D "donut hole" to financial misery, he said, where costs are extensive and less than 5 percent ever recover.

The "donut hole" is a coverage gap that causes citizens to pay the full cost of prescription drugs once surpassing the limit. Andrews said these people are likely not taking their medication because they can't afford it, which he said will, in the long run, make the health care problem even worse.

But Hammond laid out a plan. He said AARP wants to protect Medicare benefits, lower prescription drug costs, crack down on abuse from health care providers and close the donut hole. He also said he hopes a bill is passed that will eliminate age discrimination in health care and the ability to deny coverage due to pre-existing conditions.

According to its Web site, AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization that helps people 50 and over improve the quality of their lives. The organization has grown to 40 million members and has offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. AARP boasts the nation's largest membership organization for people 50 and over.

Despite its mission to enhance life for those over 50, Andrews and Hammond made their pledge for young people, too -- the aging generation of the future. Andrews said planning for the future is important, and it's another aspect of what he said Maryland AARP plans to bring.

About 90 percent of aging Maryland residents want to age in their own homes, Andrews said, but at this time only 10 percent are doing so. He said those people are also not prepared for the end of life, preparations that could make things easier on loved ones in the end.

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