

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES  
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**CENTER FOR DRUG and HEALTH PLAN CHOICE**

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**TO:** Medicare Advantage – Prescription Drug Organizations  
Prescription Drug Plan Sponsors

**FROM:** Cynthia G. Tudor, Ph.D., Director, Medicare Drug Benefit and C&D Data Group

**SUBJECT:** State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP) Unique ID Database

**DATE:** December 9, 2008

This memorandum encourages MA organizations and Part D sponsors that have not already done so to adopt use of the *UniqueID* database on the HPMS system to provide assistance to State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP) counselors on behalf of their beneficiaries.

On September 10, 2007, CMS issued a memorandum to all MA organizations and Part D sponsors regarding the SHIP *UniqueID* system. The *UniqueID* system allows SHIP Program Directors to assign unique IDs to SHIP counselors who have been trained on privacy policies and procedures, and have signed a client confidentiality privacy statement and understand that they are accountable for the protection of a beneficiary's personal information. The SHIP counselors were able to use the *UniqueID* system to obtain information from the CSRs at 1-800-MEDICARE to assist beneficiaries with claims-related issues and concerns. Given the success we have had with the *UniqueID* system at Medicare, we encouraged MA organizations and Part D sponsors to consider implementing a similar process whereby the organization's CSRs could offer expedited customer service through SHIP counselors by utilizing the *UniqueID* system on HPMS.

Since that time, CMS has conducted surveys of MA organizations and Part D Sponsors and found that a number of organizations have successfully utilized the *UniqueID* file to better serve their plan members. A recent survey of the larger MA organizations and Part D sponsors indicates that approximately 1/2 of these organizations queried the *UniqueID* database or supported dedicated toll-free phone lines for SHIP callers. Conversely, we also found that the top 10 organizations with the highest percentages of complaints per 1,000 enrollees did not utilize the *UniqueID* database or support a dedicated toll-free SHIP phone line.

While the survey indicated some difficulties with initial access to the database, most plans were able to easily utilize the *UniqueID* database to assist their members with plan issues. CMS continues to encourage MA organizations and Part D sponsors to improve

customer services by adopting this process and to use the file by following the process outlined below:

1. CMS will provide access to an HPMS file of *UniqueIDs*. The CSRs should be able to easily search the database since the *UniqueID* is a 7-character access code (example: CT99999 may represent John Doe from the Connecticut for Senior Program in Connecticut). The first 2 positions of this code are alpha characters that denote the United States Postal Service recognized two-letter State abbreviation. The remaining 5 characters are numeric and are automatically generated by a CMS contracted source. This feature allows the search of a specific counselor in order to verify the required information since the database is alphabetically organized by state abbreviation.
2. When a SHIP counselor contacts the Part D sponsors' call center, the call center should be instructed to disclose information to a SHIP director/counselor when the following conditions are met:
  - a. The SHIP counselor has written or verbal authorization from a beneficiary or their representative to discuss a beneficiary's plan issues or concerns; **and,**
  - b. The counselor is listed on a national SHIP roster of *UniqueIDs* issued by CMS.

If both section 2a and 2b above are met, the CSR will ask questions to verify the identity of the beneficiary, i.e., full name, DOB, Medicare number, and one additional piece of information, e.g., address, phone number, or effective date(s) of Medicare A and/or B. The CSR will also ask questions to verify the identity of the SHIP counselor, i.e., her/his full name, state program name of the SHIP, State from which they are calling, etc.

If both section 2a or 2b above are **not** met, the Part D Sponsor call center CSRs should be instructed **NOT** to disclose any information pertaining to a Medicare beneficiary to a SHIP counselor.

**NOTE:** This process does NOT replace nor supercede those situations where a Medicare beneficiary 1) is sitting in the SHIP office with a counselor and is able to speak to the CSR to verify disclosure authorization, or 2) calls the SHIP and the counselor, in turn, brings the CSR into the call and the CSR confirms authorization while on that 3-way call.

As noted above, some organizations that do not utilize the *UniqueID* database have dedicated SHIP phone lines. We note that this model could be enhanced by using the State designation in the *UniqueID* unique identifier code to route calls to specific contacts best equipped to address issues from that State.

If your organization has not already begun to access the *UniqueID* database, we

encourage you to access it in the coming year. Send an email to [ship@cms.hhs.gov](mailto:ship@cms.hhs.gov) for access, or if you want to have a dedicated SHIP line. CMS will maintain a list of participating plans for SHIP counselors to reference.

If you have any questions about any of the issues in this memorandum, please contact your Medicare Advantage plan manager or Part D account manager.