

THE ALERT

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“Check 21” May Cause More Bounced Checks.

Your next checking account statement may be a surprise if you have been getting cancelled checks returned to you.

What may be more of a surprise—or even a shock—you will be getting charged for overdrawing your account when you thought you deposited money soon enough to cover a check you wrote.

The “surprises” will be the result of a new law that allows banks to speed up how fast money comes out of your account to pay for checks you have written. It also lets banks convert your checks into electronic withdrawals.

Until now, a check you wrote wouldn't get back to your bank for two or even more days.

When your bank got the check, it would take the money out of your account and mail the cancelled check back to you with your bank statement.

That won't happen any more. Now the money will come out of your account much faster because it will be processed electronically.

In effect, your bank will get a computerized message or digital copy of the check that will notify it to take the money out of your account to pay for the check.

If you thought you had another day or two to deposit money to cover your check, you would be wrong.

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THE ALERT IS THE NEWSLETTER FOR SENIORS



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Although processing of checks you write will be speeded, the processing of checks you deposit will take as long as in the past.

The result of the new law is expected to be more bounced checks and more bounced check fees—a situation that has many consumer groups concerned.

Two groups, Consumers Union and the Consumer Federation of America have urged major banks to slow the implementation of the law which became effective on October 28 and to take other consumer-friendly actions to ease the effects of the “Check 21” law.

Its name stands for “Check Clearing for the 21st Century Act.”

As for the checks you write, the receiving bank now may destroy the original and transmit a digital copy to your bank.

Your bank is allowed to send you a substitute check—a kind of photocopy—in place of your original cancelled check or no copy at all.

Banks may take time to put new systems of check handling into operation. Some may apply them only to larger checks initially.

When substitute checks are produced, they can be used legally to prove a

disputed payment. However, that is only if the substitute check meets Check 21’s standards, according to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation.

The important thing to

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remember is to make sure you have enough money in your account to cover any checks you write.

If you don’t follow that rule, you could be facing bounced check fees which have become very costly, typically in the range of \$15 to \$30 per check.

Or your bank may pay overdrawn checks—even if you have not signed up for overdraft protection—and charge a lot for doing so.

When the bank pays an overdraft (a check written without enough money in the bank to cover it) the bank is, in effect, making a loan so there can be interest and other charges.

The new law makes it really important to keep your

checkbook up to date by recording every check, ATM withdrawal, bank fees and debit card purchases so you know exactly how much money is available in your account.

It is also important to review your bank statement each month to make sure there are no transactions you have

not authorized.

Let your bank know immediately, if you find something wrong.

Here is another way to protect your money: Do not give your checking account number, Social Security number or credit card number to people you don’t know who call you on the phone, e-mail you or come to your door.

Join Volunteer Visitors At Nursing Homes

A pilot program to encourage people to volunteer to regularly visit isolated and often forgotten residents at selected Cuyahoga County nursing homes is underway.

If you are interested in learning more about the Friendly Visitor Project, call Danette Allums, coordinator of advocacy for the Cuyahoga County Department of Senior and Adult Services, at 216-420-6770.

A new publication about elder care, grandparent kinship/caregivers, free home weatherization and other Cuyahoga County programs is now available. Call 216-987-7000 and ask for the Working Families Resource Guide.

Social Security Goes Up, But So Do Medicare Premiums; If Your Income Is Low, You May Get Help to Pay for Them

Although Social Security checks will be increased by 2.7 percent in January, Medicare premiums will increase at the same time.

The Medicare Part B premiums will jump from \$66.50 to \$78.20 per month.

At the same time, there will be changes in the Medicare benefits themselves. For instance the deductible, which you have to pay before your doctor's bills are paid by Medicare, is going up from \$100 to \$110.

If you are hospitalized, your Part A Medicare deductible will go from

\$876 to \$912.

The amount of your daily co-payment also will increase from \$219 to \$228 for hospital stays between 61 and 90 days and from \$438 to \$456 for stays of 91 to 150 days.

If your income is low, you may be able to get help to pay for your Medicare premiums and, in some cases, the deductibles and coinsurance.

Eligibility for the medical assistance programs depends on your monthly income and your assets.

When you read the chart below, keep in mind that the Government disregards \$20 of income so the "official" income

limits are lower than stated. The figures in the chart are the actual income limits.

There may be other exceptions that apply to you so if you think you might qualify, go to your county welfare department to apply for assistance.

If you want to apply for other assistance, such as for the Medicaid or food stamp programs, complete an application for that, too.

Income limits are increased each April.

If you qualify for some of the programs described below, you also may qualify for free prescription drug cards. **See story on Page 4.**

QUALIFIED MEDICARE BENEFICIARY PROGRAM				
	INDIVIDUAL		COUPLE	
Program	Monthly Income Limit	Assets	Monthly Income Limit	Assets
QMB pays the monthly Part A, B and C premiums, and Medicare deductibles and co-insurance	\$796 or less*	\$4000	\$1061 or less*	\$6000
SLMB pays only the Part B premium.	\$951 or less*	\$4000	\$1269 or less*	\$6000
QI-1 pays only the Part B premium.	\$1068 or less*	\$4000	\$1426 or less*	\$6000
QWDI pays only the Part A premium	\$1572 or less*	\$4000	\$2102 or less*	\$6000

*Official amounts are \$20 less, but \$20 of income is disregarded. We have used "actual" income limits.

There's Help for Low Income Seniors to Apply for Drug Discount Cards; However, December is the Deadline to Get up to \$600 In Free Prescriptions

A major effort to sign up low-income seniors to get Medicare-approved discount drug cards is now underway to meet a **December deadline for applications.**

That effort will help low-income seniors figure out which drug card is best for them and will help them to apply for it so they can get up to \$600 of help on prescription drugs this year and next.

The program is being carried out by the Benjamin Rose Institute, the Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging and others under a Federal grant.

To qualify for the \$600 credit, single seniors must have monthly incomes of \$1,047 or less and couples may qualify with monthly incomes of \$1,406 or less.

The actual deadline for applying for this year's drug card is December 31.

However, Semanthie Brooks, director of community advocacy for Benjamin Rose, said it is aiming to get all applications in the mail by December 15 to avoid delays with heavy holiday mailings.

If you qualify as a low-income senior, call 216-373-1650 immediately.

Seniors who qualify for the \$600 credit for drug purchases do not have to spend that amount during this calendar year.

They will be able to carry the amount over to

2005 and will automatically receive another \$600 to help buy prescription drugs.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid already has automatically enrolled seniors who qualify for some of the Qualified Medicare Beneficiary Programs described on Page 3.

Some 55,000 low-income Ohioans, an estimated 7,000 in Cuyahoga County, may have received the randomly-selected drug cards in the mail.

However, it is possible that after the \$600 is used up, that

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card will not provide a discount or have a wrap around agreement with drug companies to allow seniors to continue receiving drugs at a low cost.

Benjamin Rose can help you sort out which card is best for you, depending on which of your drugs are covered. Certain cards cover certain drugs.

The card you may have received in the mail has to be activated by calling the 800 number specified.

"We are encouraging people to call us and make sure they got the right card before it is activated. If it is not the right card, we can help them select another card based on the medicines they are taking," said Ms. Brooks.

"Many seniors may not know what the card is and may have tossed it in the

garbage," she said.

If you received a card, you should call Benjamin Rose at 216-373-1650 before activating it or if you no longer have it.

You can call the same number for help in selecting a card, if you qualify for the \$600 discount and did not receive a card.

"We will be happy to help select a card," said Ms. Brooks.

The program serves residents of Cuyahoga, Lake, Geauga, Lorain and Medina counties.

Seniors in other counties should call their own area agency on aging.

The Cleveland Department of Aging also got a grant to help low-income seniors who may qualify for the \$600 prescription drug program. To reach the Cleveland program, call 216-664-2833.

For seniors who do not qualify for the low-income program but are having trouble deciding on drug cards, Ms. Brooks said they can get help in selecting a card from OSHIP (Ohio Senior Health Insurance Information) at 1-800-686-1578.

Seniors enrolled in HMOs are referred to their own HMO because they probably were automatically enrolled through it, explained Ms. Brooks, but may not have been given the \$600 credit if they qualify.

SENIOR CITIZEN CENTERS AND LEGAL AID OFFICES

CUYAHOGA COUNTY

To find out if we can help you,
call 216-687-1900 from 9 to 11:30 a.m. and 1 to 4:30 p.m. weekdays
Seniors with a legal question for an attorney may phone 216-687-1900
on Tuesdays or Thursdays between 1 p.m. and 4:30 p.m.

EAST SIDE**WEST SIDE**

Buckeye Senior Center
11802 Buckeye Road
216-491-8450

Martin DePorres Center
1264 East 123 Street
216-268-3909

Lakewood Office on Aging
16024 Madison Avenue
216-521-1515

Fairhill Institute
12200 Fairhill Road
216-421-1350

May Dugan Center
4115 Bridge Avenue
216-631-5800

Metro Health Hospital
2500 Metro Health Drive
216-778-5551

Goodrich-Gannett Center
1368 East 55 Street
216-432-1717

Murtis H. Taylor Center
13422 Kinsman Avenue
216-283-4400

Parma Senior Resource Center
7001 West Ridgewood
440-885-8155

Helen S. Brown Senior Center
16100 Euclid Avenue
216-761-8410

Stella Walsh Recreational Center
7345 Broadway Avenue
216-441-0111

**DOWNTOWN
LEGAL AID OFFICE**

Hough Opportunity Center
8555 Hough Avenue
216-421-5400

Woodland Branch
Cleveland Public Library
5806 Woodland Avenue
216-623-7109

Downtown Legal Aid Office
1223 West Sixth Street
216-687-1900
Toll Free: 1-888-817-3777

Maple Heights Senior Center
15901 Libby Road
216-587-5481

For information or to make appointments outside Cuyahoga County phone the offices listed below

LAKE COUNTY

Lake-Geauga Legal Aid, 8 North State Street, Painesville, OH 44077
440-352-6200 or TOLL FREE 1-888-808-2800

LORAIN COUNTY

The Legal Aid Society of Lorain County, 538 West Broad Street, Elyria, OH 44035
440-323-8240 or TOLL FREE 1-800-444-7348

ASHTABULA COUNTY

Ashtabula County Legal Aid, 121 East Walnut, Jefferson, OH 44047
440-576-8120 or TOLL FREE 1-866-873-9665

**The Legal Aid Society
of Cleveland
1223 West Sixth Street
Cleveland, Ohio 44113**