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■ Open Enrollment for Medicare

Medicare is providing a special enrollment opportunity for people who missed their chance to enroll in a Medicare health or drug plan due to COVID-19. For more information, call **1-800-MEDICARE**.

In addition to enrollment, here are other measures Medicare has taken in terms of COVID-19.

- Medicare Advantage Plans and Prescription Drug Plans may waive or relax prior authorization requirements.
- Taking aggressive actions and exercising regulatory flexibilities to help healthcare providers and Medicare health plans.
- As part of an effort to address the urgent need to increase capacity to care for patients, hospitals can now provide hospital services in other healthcare facilities and sites that aren't currently considered part of a healthcare facility. This includes off-site screenings. Medicare covers medically necessary care in these facilities and sites.
- Waiving certain requirements for skilled nursing facility care.
- Establishing new codes to allow providers to correctly bill for services related to diagnosis and treatment of the illness.
- Instructing our national network of State Survey Agencies and Accrediting Organizations to focus all their efforts on infection prevention and other cases of abuse and neglect in nursing homes and hospitals.
- Instructing nursing homes and hospitals to review their infection control procedures, which they're required to maintain at all times.
- Issuing important guidance answering questions that nursing homes may have with respect to addressing cases of COVID-19.





State Senator **JUDY SCHWANK**

Serving the 11th Senatorial District

Summer 2020



Summer greetings!

I find it hard to believe this year is already more than halfway over. I hope this newsletter finds you in good health and good spirits. My office has worked diligently this year to best serve the constituents of the 11th senate district. Throughout the coronavirus pandemic we answered more than 4,000 constituent questions via e-mail and phone. My staff and I were glad to be able to continue helping the men, women, families and business owners of my district.

In this newsletter you'll find helpful information about the coronavirus COVID-19 as it relates to our Commonwealth.

*As always, if you have questions on state-related matters you can call us at **610-929-2151**, send an e-mail to senatorschwank@pasenate.com or visit my website at www.senatorschwank.com.*

Judy

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Voting

This year's general election is Tuesday, November 3. If you are uncomfortable at the thought of voting in person, you can always request a mail-in ballot, which thousands in Berks County did just this past June.



The polls are also an option and our Berks County Election Services did a good job in ensuring voters practiced social distancing and their poll workers had access to personal protective equipment. Despite the challenges of holding an election during the pandemic the process worked! You can have confidence in knowing that your vote was counted no matter how you chose to vote.

The last day to register to vote for the November 3rd election is October 19. The last day to apply for a mail-in or civilian absentee ballot is October 27th. You can apply for the ballot online now at www.votespa.com. If you prefer a paper application, call my office at **610-929-2151** and we can send you a paper application.

■ An Update on Food



This year the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture saw an unprecedented increase in families in need of food assistance. The department oversees food banks and food pantries in the state through its Bureau of Food Assistance. Using state and federal resources, the bureau works with Pennsylvania's more than 1,800 local food banks and pantries, lead agencies, soup kitchens, and other local non-profit organizations to secure food products and funding. The Bureau manages Pennsylvania's food and funding allocations for programs such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program, Commodity Supplemental Food Program, National School Lunch Program, Summer Food Service Program, Farmers Market Nutrition Program, Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, State Food Purchase Program, and others. Even our local farmers got involved by distributing fresh milk and eggs to families in need. This work is done in conjunction with USDA and many local partners who make

up the state's charitable food system.

To get a better idea of how the increase in demand was being handled, Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Secretary Russel Redding invited me to volunteer at Central Pennsylvania Food Bank. I was there to help package food to be distributed. It was my job to add a 2-pound bag of lentils to each box. Gone were the days of families being able to "shop" in food pantries – instead boxes were pre-packaged to limit physical interactions.

In June, I requested a Senate Democratic Policy Committee hearing to learn more about how our food supply chains in Pennsylvania

had been affected by COVID-19 and to discuss how the legislature can help struggling businesses in the food sector. We had great speakers and my biggest takeaways from the hearing was to truly appreciate how hard our Agriculture Department (and our farmers) have worked to pivot to meet new demands – and that one of the biggest ways we can support the industry is by supporting our local restaurants.

If you're interested in watching that hearing, you can catch it online at www.senatorschwank.com/video.

Locally, Helping Harvest (formerly the Greater Berks Food Bank), has done a tremendous job in increasing the amount of food it distributes. In June, they estimated distributing more than 1 million pounds of food per month during the height of the pandemic. We're lucky to have them!

If you need food assistance or would like to make a donation, call Helping Harvest at **610-926-5802** for guidance.

■ Real ID

If you're still pondering the idea of a REAL ID, you now have more time to make a decision. The Department of Homeland Security has postponed the enforcement date for REAL ID from **October 1, 2020, to October 1, 2021**, in response to COVID-19 and the national emergency declaration. PennDOT made the decision to pause REAL ID issuance in the Commonwealth out of an abundance of caution and in the interest of public health.



■ My Legislation

In March I introduced legislation to exempt any payment received by an individual under the CARES Act from the definition of “income” in the programs such as: property tax/rent rebate, PACE/PACENET, childcare subsidies, medical assistance and CHIP.

There are income limits for these programs and other similar programs. This legislation was important to me because I wanted to be sure that anyone who received the one-time Federal direct deposit of \$1,200, or \$2,400 for married couples, would not then become ineligible for state programs they rely on.

Those payments should not be the tipping scale between receiving a benefit or losing a benefit. The bill, SB1100, is in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

■ Pennsylvania Lottery Update

The Pennsylvania Lottery was established by law in 1971 to generate funding for programs that benefit older Pennsylvanians. Since the very first ticket was sold in 1972, the Pennsylvania Lottery has contributed more than \$30 billion to benefit programs that include property tax and rent rebates; free and reduced-fare transportation services; the low-cost prescription programs PACE and PACENET; care services; and local services provided by the 52 Area Agencies on Aging.

In the 2018-19 fiscal year, the Pennsylvania Lottery sold a record of more than \$4.5 billion in games, from which it generated a record profit of more than \$1.14 billion to benefit older Pennsylvanians. In addition, a record of more than \$2.9 billion in prizes was paid to winners.

In that timeframe, Berks County saw more than \$29 million in benefits. Included in that number is \$2.79 million in the Shared and Free-Ride Program; \$3.46 million in prescription assistance; and \$8.65 million in Property Tax and Rent Rebates.

In June, the Pennsylvania Department of Revenue informed me that for this fiscal year (2019-2020), as of May 31, the Lottery was down about \$28.2 million. As there was still a month left in the fiscal year at time of writing this, and without the final report, it's too soon to tell how that will impact Berks County.



Property Tax/ Rent Rebate

**Applications Due
December 31, 2020**

The Property Tax/Rent Rebate program benefits eligible Pennsylvanians age 65 and older; widows and widowers age 50 and older; and people with disabilities age 18 and older. The income limit is **\$35,000** a year for homeowners and **\$15,000** annually for renters, and half of Social Security income is excluded. Spouses, personal representatives or estates may also file rebate claims on behalf of claimants who lived at least one day in 2019 and meet all other eligibility criteria.

The maximum standard rebate is \$650, but supplemental rebates for qualifying homeowners can boost rebates to **\$975**. The Department of Revenue automatically calculates supplemental rebates for qualifying homeowners.

Property Tax/Rent Rebate application forms and assistance are available at no cost from Department of Revenue district offices, local Area Agencies on Aging, senior centers and state legislators' offices, including mine.