Plain Writing at the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services: April 2013

CMS continues to help our consumers, providers and the public navigate a complex health care system by communicating as clearly, plainly and transparently as possible.

We continue to train CMS employees

The Office of Communications continues to train CMS employees through new employee orientation. We've also developed tools to help staff integrate plain writing into their work. We've included these documents on the intranet and in our plain writing training:

- **Plain Writing Style Guide:** This guide includes plain writing tips, terms to use in place of other terms (both general and program specific), and other guidance.
- **Web Writing Style Guide:** This guide includes tips for writing meaningful and user focused content like writing links, headlines, and content that's easy to scan.
- **7 Plain Writing Basics:** These tips help keep writing direct and focused on the user.
- **CMS Tone of Voice Checklist**: This checklist is a series of questions a writer should answer about their document to make sure it complies with CMS Tone of Voice. Communications from CMS should always sound the same across our communication channels. Users should have the same CMS experience whether they're visiting our Web sites, reading a publication or calling our call centers.

Plain writing in consumer products

The Office of Communications is a longtime proponent of plain writing, and we've been incorporating plain writing principles into every product we create for years. Most of these products are available online, and many are also available in print.

An example of our plain writing efforts that won a 2012 ClearMark Award from the Center for Plain Language is the re-designed **Medicare Summary Notice (MSN)**. We re-designed the MSN to incorporate consumer-tested improvements, including user-focused organization and messaging to help people navigate their Medicare benefits. The MSN is an explanation of benefits sent quarterly to people with Medicare who've had claims filed for services. The re-designed notice is available online through MyMedicare.gov and will be mailed this year.

Understanding our audiences

Social marketing has informed the Office of Communications' product and message development for many years. By understanding our target audiences' health literacy, culture, language, attitudes, perceptions and identifying barriers we have improved our products and therefore our audiences' ability to understand our programs. This knowledge also helps us keep our products person-centered. As our resources allow, we consumer test our messaging and products with our target audiences.

Feedback opportunities

To provide an opportunity for public feedback, we created the CMS Plain Language webpage to explain the importance of the Plain Writing Act and outline CMS' commitment to full compliance with the Act. The public can contact CMS and send comments via the [feedback form](feedback%20form) posted on the page.

Looking ahead

As we continue to prepare content for the launch of the Health Insurance Marketplace later this year, we continue to employ the plain writing and web optimization principles we've been using as part of our plain language strategy. We're testing these products with our consumer audiences to ensure content and messaging is understandable so that consumers take advantage of new coverage opportunities.