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October 13, 2005

Honorable Benjamin L. Cardin
U.S. House of Representatives
2207 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative Cardin:

The undersigned participants in the Campaign for Quality Care, a coalition of national organizations that work together on issues related to care in nursing homes, are writing to thank you for the introduction of legislation to remove the exclusion of benzodiazepines from coverage under the Medicare drug benefit program that will begin on January 1, 2006. We support your efforts to ensure that this important class of medications will be available to Medicare beneficiaries.

Benzodiazepines are commonly used for management of acute anxiety, panic attacks, seizure disorders, and muscle spasms in those with cerebral palsy or other disorders. The lack of coverage for these medications under Medicare Part D would be especially problematic for individuals with both Medicaid and Medicare coverage, since many may not have the ability to pay for needed medications out of pocket. Approximately 20% of these dual eligible individuals are currently taking one of these medications.

In nursing facilities, about two-thirds of residents now obtain medications through a Medicaid drug benefit, and about 14 percent of nursing facility residents take a benzodiazepine medication. Many of these residents have been taking these medications for years, or even decades. Abrupt withdrawal of the medication could cause severe medical problems that would require hospitalization.

We appreciate your leadership on this issue of critical importance to the most vulnerable of Medicare beneficiaries.

Sincerely,

Alice H. Hedt

On behalf of:
Alzheimer's Association
American Academy of Nursing: Expert Panel on Aging

American Health Care Association
American Medical Directors Association
American Occupational Therapy Association
American Society of Consultant Pharmacists
Catholic Health Association
National Association for the Support of Long Term Care
National Association of Activity Professionals
National Association of Directors of Nursing Administration in Long-Term Care
National Association of Social Workers
National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform
National Conference of Gerontological Nurse Practitioners
Service Employees International Union