Medicare billing under fire

Hinchey wants ambulance-payment rules changed

By Meghan E. Murphy
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Residents in at least two local towns have called on officials to fix a Medicare billing problem that has made seniors afraid to call for a ride to the hospital. Ida Gage of Pine Bush said she owes about $2,000 Medicare won't pay for simply because the volunteer corps picked her up and MobileLife assisted.

Medicare rules only allow billing from one provider, so when a MobileLife paramedic assists a volunteer ambulance truck, the patient gets stuck with a bill. If MobileLife gave the ride, the senior wouldn't have to pay.

Pine Bush Ambulance Volunteer Bunny Haskin said volunteers have called on legislators for years to fix this problem and nothing has happened.

"When a senior citizen is reluctant to call for an ambulance because they're afraid of the bill, that's scary, and that's what's happening," Haskin said.

Hinchey previously has backed a federal bill to fix the problem but that effort went nowhere.

His spokesman, Mike Morosi, said an administrative solution is more likely to succeed, especially in a Congress focused on cutting costs.

Hinchey wrote to Donald Berwick, U.S. Health Department's Medicare Services Center administrator, to request a change in the payment policies.

"This is a significant problem, and it's got to be addressed," Hinchey said in a statement.

mmurphy@th-record.com