

Administration official says more time needed on dual eligibles

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As the cost and number of dual-eligible beneficiaries continue to rise, the Obama administration's point person on this patient population told impatient senators at a hearing today that ideas for cost savings will not come until next year.

"What we need right now is a little more time," Melanie Bella, director of the Medicare-Medicaid Coordination Office in HHS, said when the members of the Senate Finance Committee pressed her for concrete ideas or recommendations to lower the spiraling costs for beneficiaries who are eligible for both Medicare and Medicaid.

The plea for patience in addressing a decades-old problem responsible for a growing share of federal healthcare costs drew bipartisan incredulity.

"She is a good person, but if you ask me, this country has been pretty much treading water on this for decades now," Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) said to reporters after the hearing.

Senators from both parties pointed out that the administration's current pilot project testing care coordination and spending innovations on a tiny segment of the 9 million dual eligibles is only the latest in decades of limited attempts to control the rising cost of dual-eligible care. Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.), the panel's chairman, pointed out that dual eligibles now consume nearly half of Medicaid's spending, despite accounting for only 18% of its patients.