

**Barbara Cisek**  
**Testimony before the**  
**United States Senate Special Committee on Aging**  
**March 6, 2019**

Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. It is an honor to be here.

My name is Barbara Cisek. I am 72 years old and live in Rural Ridge, Allegheny County. My husband Ed and I were high school sweethearts, married for just shy of 43 years when he passed away in 2009. We raised two sons together, David and Michael, who now have four kids between them. My son David is here with me today.

Raising my family, keeping our hairdressing shop open, and caring for my Mom as she battled chronic illnesses was hard. Like me, she had a lot of different medical issues and was sick a lot, but always fought to get back on her feet. She was diagnosed with ovarian cancer at age 80 and lived with us the last three years of her life.

I wonder what will happen if I live to be my Mother's age. With all the medical expenses I'm facing, on a fixed income, I'm scared there won't be anything left. I pay about \$500 out of my own pocket for medicine and over-the-counter items every month. If I actually took all of the medications my doctors prescribe, the costs would total well over \$1,500 every month. That's on top of my Medicare Part B premium of \$134 per month and the \$293 I pay for a Medicare Advantage plan.

I have battled bleeding ulcers, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and severe migraine headaches for years, and was diagnosed a year and a half ago with diabetes. I am recovering from a stroke that I suffered last November and need to get a total shoulder replacement in the next several months. I'm living with chronic pain caused by a bulging disc, spinal stenosis, and sciatica. In addition to injections for my shoulder that cost \$50 every 3 months, I use an inhaler to manage my COPD, have an oxygen concentrator at home, and need to start using portable oxygen tanks when I go out. With ovarian cancer in the family, I get tested every year. Sometimes I feel like I'm the puzzle with the piece missing.

What makes managing all these conditions worse and more stressful is never knowing what my insurance will cover from year to year and what my prescription drug costs will be. The Imitrex I took for the migraines cost \$150 before it became generic. Now that it is generic, my insurance won't cover it and I pay \$45 for 27 pills. Phenergan, a medicine my doctor recommended to help with my nausea isn't covered, and there is no way I can afford the \$1,032 price. Elavil, a medicine that helps with my migraines, is no longer covered and I have to pay \$85 for a 30-day

supply. I spend \$100 for two ounces of cream to treat skin rashes that insurance won't cover. It's hard to make the cream stretch, but I use the tiniest amount that I can to make it last. I just found out my shingles vaccine is not covered and will cost \$420 out of pocket.

The most expensive medicine I take is Nexium, and I have to have it. Other forms of the drug, which treats my slow-bleeding stomach ulcers, have made me sick to the point where I needed blood transfusions. I go through the step therapy process every year, with my doctor sending a letter to my plan confirming that I do actually need the brand-name drug. For a 90-day supply, I pay \$300. My Spiriva inhaler for the COPD is \$150 each month.

When you add these drug costs to what I pay for other supplies, like diabetic test strips and lancets, my oxygen tanks, my CPAP, an eye vitamin to prevent cataracts, xylimelts and special bottles of mouthwash and toothpaste to treat dry mouth and receding gums, it's a lot. It all adds up. That's why I'm sharing my story with you today—to help you understand what it's like for us senior citizens who are feeling the full weight of these costs because we make a little too much to get help from the state or the federal government.

My husband worked as an engineering aide at Westinghouse in nuclear fuels for nearly 40 years. He worked hard, as I did, to build a good life and a good future for our family. I've lived in our home for 45 years and I don't want to leave it. I want to be able to afford my medicines so I can stay healthy and away from the nursing home. If things keep going like they are, with drugs costing more and more, and my insurance covering less and less, I don't know what I'll do.

I came here today to speak not just for myself, but for every other senior citizen who has had to stand at the pharmacy counter and leave something behind.

Thank you for the invitation to testify before the Committee. I look forward to answering your questions.