

Press Release

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SCHAKOWSKY, HOUSE DEMOCRATS, ANNOUNCE PRESCRIPTION FOR CHANGE

Call for Medicare prescription drug benefit that is affordable, simple, and reliable

WASHINGTON, DC -- U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky, House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, and House Democrats today announced their plan to fix the Republican Prescription Drug Law - the Democratic Prescription for Change. The Democratic plan would provide a Medicare drug benefit that is affordable, simple, and reliable, by providing a benefit administered by Medicare that requires the agency to negotiate for lower drug prices, like the VA does.

Representative Schakowsky is an original sponsor of H.R. 752, the Medicare Prescription Drug Savings and Choice Act, which would accomplish those goals.

Schakowsky's statement is below, as prepared for delivery:

In my years as executive director of the Illinois Council of Senior Citizens, I heard plenty of seniors asking for an affordable drug benefit under Medicare. I never once heard seniors asking for the ability to sort through dozens of private insurance plans. But that's exactly what they got. Instead of a simple expansion of Medicare, they got Part D private plans. I've met and heard from many constituents - seniors and their children, friends and counselors - literally in tears about the complexity and confusion of this plan.

This program wasn't crafted to meet the needs of beneficiaries or their doctors. It was created by and for the drug and insurance companies. Instead of bringing seniors affordable drugs, these companies have brought donut holes, late enrollment penalties, prior authorization barriers and confusion on both sides of the counter.

The Part D program is not in Medicare where it belongs. You can't use your Medicare card to get drug benefits. You have to sort through dozens of private plans - or join an HMO - to enroll. And for those beneficiaries who were unable to choose a plan before May 15th? A permanent late enrollment penalty that increases throughout their lifetimes. But, as one senior said, if you think picking a plan was hard, trying getting your drugs through it. Under Part D, each private drug company decides what drugs to cover. And guess what, a lot of senior citizens and people with disabilities aren't getting the medications they need.

The June 5 American Medical News headline reads, "Physicians complain Medicare D decisions threaten patient care." It describes a urologist who can't get authorization for both drugs his patient needs - even though they work in combination. It talks about a neurologist whose Alzheimer's patients can only get their medications if she fills out a form saying they haven't had a decline in health. And it talks about Dr. Elizabeth Delesante, a psychiatrist in Brainerd, Minnesota, who said it took her 4 months and more than 200 uncompensated hours of work before she was able to get a Part D plan to pay for the right dosage she had prescribed as necessary to treat her patient's schizophrenia.

We propose giving beneficiaries the choice of a benefit in Medicare. We proposed a benefit simple enough that CMS wouldn't publish errors in its own guidebook explaining the plan. A benefit in Medicare simple enough for HHS Secretary Leavitt's parents, who had to switch plans once they found out that the plan they chose (with his advice) would have eliminated their retiree benefits.

That's because Medicare works. It is simple and reliable. It is a shining example of how a publicly-financed and publicly-accountable system can promote and protect the common good. Democrats have a Prescription for Change that would provide a prescription drug benefit that is administered through Medicare and that requires the agency to negotiate for lower prices. This drug benefit wouldn't make big changes throughout the year, like increasing co-payments or creating administrative hurdles. It would cure the headaches that Part D has caused.

It is time Fix Part D and to create a plan that all beneficiaries can understand and that they and their doctors can easily use.