

**April 26, 2006**

**HOUSE DEMOCRATS CALL ON HHS TO TELL PUBLIC WHICH INSURANCE COMPANIES ARE TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT PART D PLANS**

**IN LETTER TO LEAVITT, DEMOCRATS ASK CMS TO RELEASE INFORMATION REGARDING PERFORMANCE OF PART D CALL CENTERS**

WASHINGTON, DC -- U.S. Representatives Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) and Pete Stark (D-CA) were joined by Representatives John Dingell (D-MI), Charles Rangel (D-NY), Henry Waxman (D-CA), and Sherrod Brown (D-OH) in sending a letter to HHS Secretary Leavitt requesting that the agency release the information it has collected regarding the performance of Part D prescription drug plan call centers. According to numerous press reports, many of these call centers have failed to meet federal standards in providing accurate, timely information to beneficiaries.

A lack of independent counselors has forced most beneficiaries to rely on private insurance companies to provide them with information on the available plans. Yet, CMS is refusing to make public information on which plans are meeting federal standards and which are not. Beneficiaries have until May 15th to enroll in a plan or switch plans to get coverage that best meets their needs. Despite bipartisan Congressional support for an extension of that deadline in light of marketing scams, inaccurate information about plans, and continued confusion, President Bush has refused to extend the May 15 enrollment deadline.

"As they field calls from marketers and try to sort through dozens of Part D plans, many beneficiaries are struggling to get the facts about which plan is best for them. With the May 15th deadline fast approaching, beneficiaries have an immediate right to know and need to know which insurance companies are meeting federal standards and which may be providing misleading or inaccurate information." Schakowsky said.

Schakowsky and Stark have sponsored a bill to extend the enrollment deadline until the end of the year to give beneficiaries more time to get unbiased information and to choose the right plan. Their bill, the Medicare Informed Choice Act, would also allow beneficiaries to switch their plans in 2006 to protect those whose plans' formularies change or who make a mistake. According to the Congressional Budget Office, an additional 1.1 million would receive coverage this year if the deadline were extended, and a total of 10 million would avoid late enrollment penalties.

The full text of the Schakowsky, Stark, Dingell, Rangel, Waxman and Brown letter is below:

Secretary Leavitt:

It has come to our attention that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has information regarding the performance of Part D prescription drug plan "call centers". These call centers are intended to provide critically needed information on plan policies and procedures for Medicare beneficiaries.

Based on press reports, Part D insurance companies have not been meeting federal standards in providing information to beneficiaries through their call centers. We are concerned about how these inaccuracies will affect beneficiaries' abilities to enroll and navigate the new Part D benefit - especially with the May 15th deadline looming in the very near future.

Moreover, we are concerned that CMS is withholding this information from beneficiaries -- and from Congress which has a critical role in oversight of CMS activities. We ask that you provide us -- and the public -- with this information immediately. It is also imperative that this information be presented in a format that allows beneficiaries, and those helping them enroll, to be able to identify specific plans and their performance evaluations. Aggregated data will not be of any help.

According to The New York Times, ("Deadline Near, Jams Are Seen for Drug Plan," April 24, 2006):

"A federal contractor is making thousands of calls to insurers to measure the performance of their call centers. Each insurer has received data on its own performance. In many cases, the reports say, federal standards were "not met."

Medicare officials had said the data would be publicly available before May 15. Insurers are lobbying against disclosure, saying the federal standards are too stringent."

The knowledge of problems at call centers would be extremely valuable for senior citizens and persons with disabilities who have not yet enrolled in a Part D plan or who might want to quickly change plans if they made a choice based on inaccurate information. Medicare beneficiaries, their families and Congress have the right to know about identified performance problems.

Immediate and wide dissemination of this information is particularly vital given the Administration's refusal to extend the May 15th enrollment deadline for all people enrolled in

Medicare. For the majority of beneficiaries who are trying to make informed choices in these last weeks, any decisions made based on faulty or incomplete information or coercion may not be corrected until the next plan year starting in January 2007.

Accordingly, we request that you provide us with this performance data immediately and present us with the mechanisms you are using to ensure that this information is widely disseminated to the public at the same time.

Thank you for your attention to this important, timely matter.