

OCTOBER 19, 2005

SCHAKOWSKY VOWS TO FIGHT AGAINST CUTS THAT HURT SENIORS, OTHERS

WASHINGTON, DC - U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky today spoke at the annual meeting of the National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform days before the Republican leadership was expected to introduce billions of dollars worth of budget cuts that will affect seniors, students, workers, and others.

Below is the text of her statement:

As the former Director of the Illinois State Council of Senior Citizens, as someone who worked to pass nursing home reforms in the Illinois legislature, and as an activist first, Congresswoman second, I want to thank you for your great work.

There is no substitute to having you here on the Hill today. I am a firm believer that lawmakers need to know how our work - and our decisions - impact lives - for better and, unfortunately sometimes, for worse. You put a face to the policy and provide a reality check for us as we make critical decisions that impact the lives of nursing home residents.

The timing of your annual meeting, as I am sure you know, coincides with consideration in the House of newly proposed budget reconciliation cuts. These are cuts to entitlement programs and will likely include harmful impacts on nursing homes and health care in our country (not to mention food stamps, student loans and a lot of other important programs).

I am on the Energy and Commerce Committee, and we have already been told to find \$15 billion in cuts to the programs under our jurisdiction. Specifically, between \$1.5 and \$2 billion of that so-called savings is targeted to come from those who are in or are going to nursing homes. The Republican Leadership would like to change the law to include a "look back" of five years into the finances of the elderly to try to make sure that seniors are not giving away their assets shortly before entering nursing homes in order to be better situated to deal with those future costs.

In an attempt to stay one step ahead of a few bad actors, they are proposing a sweeping change that will capture thousands of people who genuinely need assistance.

For those who need Medicaid to pay the \$4,500 to \$6,000 monthly cost of nursing home care, these are truly life and death decisions we are making.

As I have said many, many times, budgets are not just about numbers. There is probably no more moral document that we work on in Congress than the budget. We are making moral decisions when we decide which programs we are going to pay for and which we are going to cut.

Already, 18,000 people die every year because they do not have health insurance. The number of those without health insurance increased by 800,000 people over the last year.

If we cut Medicaid, if even more seniors do not get the health care they need, you can bet those numbers of those who die are going to increase.

If we are going to be morally-responsible, I think we need to take a close look at the tax cuts for the wealthy passed over the last few years. If tax cuts are not on the table, then the Congress will not look beyond cuts that will further hurt the elderly, the vulnerable and the poor. That's just plain wrong and that's the direction we are heading.

Right now, the budget calls for \$35 billion in reconciliation cuts - and we may be voting on the House floor to increase that number to \$50 billion. That is a 44% increase in existing cuts. For Medicaid, we just found out that instead of \$10 billion from Medicaid, we will be looking at \$11. How many more people could die as a result of that decision? How many more will not get the care that they need? How many more will not be able to live in a nursing home, where it is in their best interest to be?

Soon, we will also be considering \$70 billion more in tax cuts. Again, the majority of these will go to the wealthy. You do the math. Is it worth it?

I will continue to follow your lead in the effort to improve the quality of life for nursing home residents so that the facilities in which they live provide them a safe, clean, effective and dignified way of life. But we must also continue working together so that the option of nursing home care, while not always ideal, remains an option that is available to those who need it. Nursing facilities do provide a home and health care to some of our most vulnerable citizens. Congress should be supporting your work. We should not be denying seniors the care they need in the name of the bottom line - especially since the bottom line is tax cuts for the wealthy. Please be assured that I will fight against any cuts that could put seniors' health care in jeopardy.