

**OCTOBER 12, 2005**

**LAWMAKERS, ADVOCATES OFFER ADVICE ON CONFUSING NEW MEDICARE DRUG PLANS**

**TELL BENEFICIARIES TO CHECK THE FACTS, WATCH FOR FRAUD, AND TAKE TIME TO CHOOSE THE BEST PLAN**

CHICAGO, IL. -- Today, U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky, Senator Dick Durbin, Attorney General Lisa Madigan, and local senior advocates met to discuss the new Medicare drug plans being marketed to Medicare beneficiaries starting this month. The officials held a press conference after the meeting to help seniors and people with disabilities navigate their way through the Medicare drug benefit plans announced on October 1st. By May 15, 2006, Medicare beneficiaries in Cook County who decide to opt into the new Medicare drug plans will have to choose between 69 plans. There are a total of 136 different drug plans statewide.

U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky said: "Even a Harvard lawyer would have a hard time figuring out how this drug program works. Sorting through the 69 different drug plans offered in Cook County to determine which covers the needed drugs for the best price at the right pharmacy will be nearly impossible for many seniors and people with disabilities. Our best advice is take your time, watch for fraud, and seek credible assistance before you act." Schakowsky is sponsoring legislation to protect seniors from some of the pitfalls in the legislation.

Senator Dick Durbin, sponsor of a bill in the Senate to create a Medicare-administered prescription drug benefit that is nationwide, affordable, and accessible, said: "When the Medicare prescription drug benefit was designed, it was with pharmaceutical companies and HMOs in mind, not seniors. Instead of simply offering a drug benefit through Medicare, and negotiating bulk prices, Congress and the President chose to hand the drug benefit over to private companies. Our seniors deserve a less confusing, less expensive prescription drug plan. That's what I intend to keep working toward in Congress."

Representative Schakowsky and Senator Durbin are leading legislative efforts to provide comprehensive and affordable Medicare drug benefit coverage. Senator Durbin and

Representative Schakowsky are sponsors of the Medicare Prescription Drug and Savings Choice Act (H.R. 752 in the House and S. 873 in the Senate), which would create a nationwide Medicare-administered drug plan that requires Medicare to negotiate for discounts on drugs and ensure that all drugs a doctor determines are medically necessary are covered. Representative Schakowsky has also sponsored H.R. 3861, the Medicare Informed Choice Act, which would help beneficiaries by delaying late-enrollment penalties for a year, protecting them from locking into a plan that does not meet their needs by allowing them to switch plans for all of 2006, and maintaining employer-provided retiree benefits. Without these changes, beneficiaries will face a late-enrollment penalty if they enroll in a plan after May 15, 2006, could lose employer-provided retiree health benefits if they enroll in some Part D plans, and could be prohibited from switching plans until 2007.

These are not the only difficulties facing beneficiaries. The Medicare Part D plan is so complex that even the federal agency that administers the plan, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, is confused and has distributed materials (its Medicare and You 2006 handbook for beneficiaries and an advertisement in Parade magazine) profiling the plan that contain serious errors. Representative Schakowsky remarked: "CMS has now twice distributed erroneous information to the millions of beneficiaries struggling to choose a Part D plan. This mistake is indicative of the incredible confusion surrounding this program. CMS should send a letter to beneficiaries to inform them of its mistake and do a better job of educating beneficiaries about their options."

Attorney General Lisa Madigan said that new government programs open up new opportunities for fraud, and warned beneficiaries to protect themselves against con artists trying to take advantage of the new system. Consumers with concerns or information about people misrepresenting themselves or fraudulently promoting the new Medicare Part D prescription drug benefit can report their concerns to Madigan's Consumer Fraud Hotline at 1-800-243-0618.

Representative Schakowsky and Senator Durbin renewed their commitment to work with community leaders to provide beneficiaries with the necessary counseling and resources to choose the drug plan that best fits their needs. They also vowed to continue their efforts in Washington to pass legislation that will make the Medicare drug plan less complex and more affordable for Chicagoans, Illinoisans, and all Americans.