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**SCHAKOWSKY: REPUBLICANS MUST BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR CAMPAIGN
RHETORIC
ON PRESCRIPTION DRUG BENEFIT FOR SENIORS**

CHICAGO, IL - In an opinion piece circulated to American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) retiree members, U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) wrote, "The majority of the new Congress ran ads promising to provide a Medicare drug benefit and lower prices. They may have said anything to get elected but voters must hold them accountable for making good on that promise."

Below is the full text of Schakowsky's opinion piece:

Ray and Gayleen lost their home because of high drug bills. Harold and Margaret pay \$3,000 a month for their medications. Susan is afraid she'll lose retiree benefits. George, age 76, still works so he won't lose his coverage.

These are some of the stories I've heard and the reason I made affordable prescription drug coverage a top priority in the 107th Congress. If you listened and watched campaign ads, you might think that a majority of my colleagues agreed. Despite their campaign rhetoric, both the pharmaceutical companies and their Congressional allies teamed up to block three attempts to lower prices in the last year.

First, House and Senate Democrats offered a plan to provide a voluntary Medicare prescription drug benefit, using the power of Medicare to negotiate the lowest possible price. No gaps in coverage, no allowing insurers to refuse to pay for doctor-prescribed drugs. In the House, the Republican leadership refused even to let us offer our plan as an alternative. In the Senate, they killed the majority-backed bill with a filibuster.

Second, we tried a bipartisan approach to prevent drug companies from using legal loopholes to block competition by extending monopoly patent protections. Our bill would have saved \$60 billion. It passed the Senate 78-12, but the House Republican leadership refused to bring it up for a vote.

Third, many of us supported the Allen-Johnson bill (introduced by Representative Tom Allen in the House and sponsored by Sen. Tim Johnson in the Senate). The premise of the bill is simple: It's wrong that U.S. drug companies develop drugs with U.S. taxpayer dollars and then sell those drugs to consumers in countries like Canada at a fraction of the price. The Allen-Johnson bill requires that Medicare beneficiaries get access to the same prices paid by consumers in Canada.

AFSCME retirees led the fight to pass reform and then to publicize the candidates' real record on prescription drugs. By organizing "truth squads" in districts across the

country, you countered the \$12 million in radio and TV ads aired by groups like United Seniors Association but paid for by the drug companies. You let AFSCME members know whether candidates who claim they want to lower drug prices and add a Medicare drug benefit actually voted correctly when they had a chance.

The \$400 billion a year drug industry made over \$18 million in campaign contributions. They spend \$97 million a year and hire 400 lobbyists to influence Congress. It is no wonder that the Los Angeles Times (Nov. 8, 2002) ran a headline stating, "Drug Industry Poised to Reap Political Dividends." Drug companies are ready to have Congress and the Bush Administration grant their wish list: no price controls, no competition, and no laws to prevent U.S. consumers from being price-gouged.

Incoming Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott has already said that prescription drugs will be high on the legislative agenda for next year's 108th Congress. My bet is that he will bring up the old Republican proposal - seniors get drug coverage only if they buy private insurance policies that let insurers charge whatever they want, allow insurers to deny coverage for specific drugs, and still leave individuals facing out-of-pocket costs of \$4000 or more. And, it is likely to come as part of a bigger bill that seeks to privatize Medicare and force seniors into Medicare HMOs.

But Trent Lott faces a big problem. The majority of the new Congress ran ads promising to provide a Medicare drug benefit and lower prices. They may have said anything to get elected but voters must hold them accountable for making good on that promise.

As the 108th Congress begins and the battlelines are drawn, we are going to need the leadership of AFSCME retirees now more than ever. Get those Truth Squad t-shirts ready.