

DECEMBER 3, 2001

**SENIORS JOIN SCHAKOWSKY DURING TOWN HALL MEETING
IN NILES ORGANIZED BY THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE SOCIAL
SECURITY AND MEDICARE**

NILES, IL - U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) today joined seniors from Niles to discuss issues relating to retirement and health security, nursing home reform, and prescription drug coverage at a forum organized by the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare (NCPSSM). The town hall meeting was also attended by Max Ritchman, Executive Vice President NCPSSM and Mayor Nick Blase. Schakowsky was also honored by NCPSSM for her record in Congress, her commitment to protecting Social Security and Medicare, and her efforts to provide seniors with affordable prescription drugs.

"All of us have been affected by the tragic events of September 11. Our nation is faced with enormous challenges. We need to fight against terrorist threats and we need to rebuild our public health system. But we cannot let our new agenda erase the need to solve ongoing problems. Many senior citizens have been waiting a long time for affordable prescription drug coverage. We need to add preventive services to Medicare and provide mental health parity. We need to extend Social Security solvency without threatening guaranteed benefits. Those needs cannot be put on hold.

"Last summer, Congress passed the Bush tax, a \$1.7 trillion plus package of which nearly half of all benefits will go to the wealthiest one percent of Americans. With that one bill, the non-Social Security surplus was erased and the Medicare Trust Fund was virtually eliminated. Now, more than ever, we cannot afford to make the wealthy even wealthier while Social Security and Medicare and other critical needs are short-changed.

"That is why I introduced H.R. 2999, the First Things First Act. This bill would put the tax breaks for the upper brackets on hold until we respond to the needs created by the September 11 attacks, ensure solvency of Social Security and Medicare, provide seniors with a prescription drug benefit, and meet housing and education needs. My bill would provide \$340 billion over ten years for those purposes.

"With these resources, we can take important steps to help senior citizens and their families. First, we can extend the life of Social Security without cutting benefits. Last week, I was briefed by members of the President's Social Security Commission which, by the way, does not include a single representative of a senior citizen organization or women's group. On December 11, the Commission will meet for the last time and make its recommendations. All of those recommendations will include some form of Social Security privatization, taking funds out of Social Security to set up risky private accounts. Experts have told us that this will make the Social Security solvency problem

even worse, will jeopardize current benefits, and will cut benefits of future retirees by as much as 40 percent. Even the Commissioners agreed that, under their recommendations, no one under 55 would be assured of guaranteed, lifetime, inflation-adjusted benefits.

"I believe that we can and should extend Social Security solvency without eliminating Social Security's guaranteed benefits. My First Things First bill would allow us to use a restored surplus to extend solvency. We could lift the wage cap - the Social Security tax only applies now to the first \$80,400 of wages. Those two measures alone would meet solvency requirements without jeopardizing benefits.

"I also believe that we can improve Social Security. For example, I am a cosponsor of H.R. 2035, the CPI for Elderly Consumers bill, which would make the Social Security COLA more accurately reflect the costs that seniors pay. I support elimination of the Government Pension Offset and the Windfall Elimination Provision, which reduce Social Security benefits to retired public employees and their families.

"In terms of Medicare, we are facing similar privatization efforts that would push senior citizens into Medicare HMOs. With those HMOs cutting benefits, raising cost-sharing and moving in and out of the market at will, I believe that is a bad deal for senior. Instead, I support improving Medicare by adding a comprehensive, affordable drug benefit that is available to everyone on a voluntary basis. I also support H.R. 1400, the Prescription Drug Fairness for Seniors Act, which would allow Medicare beneficiaries to purchase medications at the same price paid by consumers in countries like Canada. Also, I am a cosponsor of bills that would provide mental health parity in Medicare (eliminating the 50% copayment for those services and assuring outpatient care), add preventive services, and improve patient protections.

"Finally, I want to mention a bill that I just introduced, working closely with the National Committee. H.R. 3331, the Quality Care for Nursing Home Patients Act, would require minimum staffing ratios for nursing homes. The more residents in a nursing home, the more qualified nursing staff would be available to provide quality care. This would improve health care and prevent avoidable problems such as untreated bedsores, malnutrition, and hip fractures."