

Eliminating Penalty Isn't Enough

By U.S. Representatives Jan Schakowsky and Pete Stark

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Op-Ed

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In response to the May 16 editorial "Mrs. Johnson's Sudden Shift":

We are authors of bipartisan legislation in Congress, HR 3861, the Medicare Informed Choice Act, to extend the May 15 Part D enrollment deadline and waive the corresponding late enrollment penalty until the end of the year. According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, our bill would encourage an additional 1.1 million people on Medicare to enroll in a plan this year. Rep. Nancy Johnson is not a cosponsor of our bill.

With the November elections approaching, Rep. Johnson is finally moving a step in the right direction and is introducing legislation to waive the late enrollment penalty. But her new proposal falls short of the help that people on Medicare need now.

Without also extending the enrollment deadline, Rep. Johnson's bill will lock millions of beneficiaries out of drug coverage for the rest of the year and will force those who've chosen poorly in rushing to meet the deadline to be locked into a plan that doesn't cover their needed medications.

This complex program has forced people to choose among dozens of private plans with differing coverage, costs, and rules. Even Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt's parents were stumped by the system. They had to switch plans when they enrolled in

one that would wipe out their retiree health benefits. So why not give everyone more time to make an informed choice?

After months of resistance, Rep. Johnson has finally realized that financially penalizing confused Medicare beneficiaries for the rest of their lives is poor public policy. But eliminating the penalty is not enough. We urge her to amend her legislation to delay the deadline so that millions of beneficiaries who still lack drug coverage can enroll this year.

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