

9 of 10 Join Drug Plan, HHS Chief Says

**By Judith Graham**

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Elated federal officials announced Tuesday that 872,000 people joined Medicare's new drug program over the last week--a figure that doesn't include those who decided to enroll at the last minute Monday.

Mike Leavitt, secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, predicted that when final data come in, 38 million of the nation's 42.5 million Medicare members will have some type of prescription drug coverage this year.

The new prescription program is the largest expansion of Medicare since the government health program for the elderly and disabled began in 1965. Until its launch, Medicare didn't pay for most medications. For all seniors but those with the very lowest incomes, the deadline for signing up for coverage this year was Monday.

People who missed the deadline can join the Medicare drug program in 2007, with enrollment for next year available Nov. 15. But they'll pay a monthly penalty of about \$2.50 for the months they missed in 2006. That penalty lasts as long as someone stays in the program.

On Tuesday, several influential lawmakers said they would back legislation to waive the penalty this year. "We can help more seniors choose to sign up by waiving the enrollment penalty," Sen. Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) said at a news conference in Washington.

Grassley and Senate co-sponsors Max Baucus (D-Mont.), Bill Nelson (D-Fla.), and Mike DeWine (R-Ohio) predicted quick passage in Congress.

But Democrats said the proposals didn't go far enough. "They still refuse to extend the deadline, thus leaving millions of seniors without any drug coverage until next year. They won't allow

those who made a costly mistake to change plans," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.).

About 1.5 million Medicare members without drug coverage could be subject to the penalty, according to the administration. Another 3 million low-income Medicare members haven't applied for prescription benefits but were exempt from Monday's deadline. The administration recently waived the penalty for this group.

According to government estimates, Medicare hot lines handled 640,000 calls Monday while 143,875 people signed up with the drug program online. Final enrollment data won't be available for more than a week.