

Signup Down to the Wire for Part D Coverage

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With just hours to go before the deadline to sign up for the new Medicare drug plan, retiree Dick Groom was unimpressed with what the federal government was offering.

"It stinks," the Aurora man said Monday. "They're saying it's like an insurance policy, but with the government's fingers in it, it's hard to tell how it's going to go."

Thousands of seniors and people with disabilities rushed to register for the Medicare Part D program early this week. With the deadline set at 11:59 p.m. Monday, the next enrollment period for most people isn't until Nov. 15 - and they'll likely face late fees.

The initiative, which went into effect Jan. 1, offers subsidized drugs through private insurance companies. Numerous administrative problems and confusion caused by myriad plans - more than 40 in Illinois - got the program off to a rocky start.

Those early woes caused congressional Democrats to call for a deadline extension, which the Bush administration opposes.

Groom, who was at a signup event sponsored by House Speaker Dennis Hastert at Provena Mercy Medical Center in Aurora, doesn't believe he'll save any money, but he planned to enroll to avoid penalties.

"I'd like the same plan as Dennis Hastert has," Groom said.

Janice Romani of Streamwood, however, had a different viewpoint, saying her household is saving \$700 a month.

Romani did extensive research on the Web before picking Humana Inc.'s plan for herself and her husband, whose drug costs are significant.

The process was so easy, Romani went on to figure out a drug plan for a cousin.

The couple paid \$1,200 monthly for medicine before. Now expenses are down to \$500.

"It worked out for us," she said.

The gap between Romani's and Groom's opinions is reflected in the political flap over Part D.

The Bush administration is touting the fact that roughly 37 million people now have drug coverage out of more than 42 million who are eligible. Officials are still tallying enrollment, reporting that more than 54,000 registered on Sunday alone.

"People can now afford to get the medicines they need," Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Administrator Mark McClellan said recently.

Democrats are mounting a last-ditch effort to extend the deadline, eliminate late fees and allow people to switch plans, which isn't permitted until Nov. 15. Currently, only people with very limited incomes receiving federal aid are exempt from these rules.

"If the people who offer the plans can change their minds, shouldn't seniors be able to change their minds?" U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin said at a news conference in Chicago.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, an Evanston Democrat, said some seniors have shown up at her office in tears because they find Part D too convoluted.

"In some cases, it verges on elder abuse because it's so unnecessarily difficult," she said.

At Walgreens pharmacies, which offer Part D counseling, the last-minute rush is keeping some busy, but that's not the case everywhere, company spokeswoman Tiffani Bruce reported.

She attributed the confusion experienced by some seniors to their not knowing where to find help.

"I think people didn't know where to turn to get the right information," Bruce said. "Once they're on the right path, it's not as difficult as they think to select a plan.

Overall, "they're better off than they would be without it," she said.