

Deadline Puts Medicare Part D in Spotlight

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With only two months left for seniors to sign up for the federal government's Medicare prescription plan without financial penalties, the political stakes are rising for its supporters and detractors.

The new drug plan, called Medicare Part D, offers coverage to seniors and people with disabilities offered through private insurance companies.

But initial glitches that affected customers who were supposed to receive financial aid and the fact there are multiple plans - 43 in Illinois - have raised a ruckus about the benefit's merits.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky of Evanston and other Democrats wrote President Bush on Tuesday, asking him to extend a May 15 deadline for people to sign up through Dec. 31 and eliminate financial penalties until that date. Currently, people who don't register by mid-May must pay a 1 percent per month late fee on premiums.

The next time people can enlist in Part D is Nov. 15.

When the program was implemented, there was "mass confusion," Schakowsky said.

"Three months later, the fog has not lifted. At the very minimum, people need time."

While Democrats have seized on Part D as an election issue, President Bush launched his own counteroffensive Tuesday, leaving Washington for an appearance in upstate New York, urging people to enroll.

"I knew that some seniors on Medicare really didn't want to be confronted with any choice and that the myriad of options would create a little confusion to begin with," he said.

"But when people have taken time to look at the options - they begin to realize the system is geared toward them."

That's not been the experience of Dorothy Ohlson, 80, of Des Plaines. She said her drugs are more expensive than before under Part D.

"It's not helping me at all," Ohlson said.

Several proposals to extend the deadline, including one sponsored by Schakowsky, are pending in Congress.