

Parties Go Their Own Ways on New Drug Card

Politicians Debate Seniors' Savings

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Monday was the first day for senior citizens to enroll for Medicare drug-discount cards, and for members of Illinois' congressional delegation, it was an opportunity to replay the partisan debate over the program.

In Yorkville, House Speaker Dennis Hastert, whose late-night arm-twisting in November persuaded reluctant fellow House Republicans to back the new Medicare bill that authorized the cards, hosted a forum for seniors.

In Chicago, Democratic Reps. Rahm Emanuel and Jan Schakowsky along with Sen. Dick Durbin, used a Streeterville pharmacy as a backdrop to warn: Buyer, beware.

The cards are meant as a temporary measure to help seniors save at the pharmacy until the full Medicare prescription drug program starts in 2006. Medicare has authorized dozens of private companies to offer the cards, and benefits begin next month.

"On June 1, seniors will begin to see real savings," Hastert told the audience.

Hastert was joined by Mark McClellan, chief administrator of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, who called Monday "a historic day in Medicare."

But downtown, the Democrats said the benefit is overrated.

"If you're a senior, think twice before you sign up for a discount card," Durbin said in front of the service counter at MedCenter Outpatient Pharmacy.

Durbin said he has introduced a bill in the Senate that, unlike the bill passed in November, would allow Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices with pharmaceutical manufacturers. The

new Medicare law is expected to cost taxpayers at least \$400 billion over 10 years, with some estimates higher.

"The only way we can bring seniors a real prescription drug benefit is to repeal the Republican Medicare drug law and replace it with a Medicare benefit that is simple and clear, a Medicare benefit that will actually bring down the prices," Schakowsky said.

The Democrats said the drug cards offer discounts that pale next to prices in Canada, from where some seniors already order prescription drugs. Durbin also said that seniors who choose the cards will be stuck with them for a year even if the prices offered to the card-holder go up.

Jackie Garner, Chicago-based regional administrator of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, said that is a false threat. "We are not going to allow a bait-and-switch," she said.