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Don't Rush to Buy Drug Cards

By TARA BURGHART - THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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YORKVILLE - Norma Yeates, looking for a way to shave her husband's \$385-a-month prescription drug bill, learned she has a lot of homework ahead before signing up for one of the new Medicare discount cards.

As the Bush administration heralded the opening of enrollment for the cards Monday, it added a cautionary note to Yeates and others: Don't sign up just yet.

Yeates, 70, walked away with a thick stack of brochures describing her choices after she and 200 other seniors met at a forum here with House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Medicare chief Mark McClellan. Her next move is to draw up a detailed chart to help figure out which one of 47 discount cards will save the Naperville couple the most money.

"I think most seniors will at first say, 'Oh, I can't do this.' But when they sit down, they can do it," Yeates said. "We've been grocery shoppers all our lives, we've bought car insurance. This is just a new wrinkle."

The cards, which cannot be used until June 1, are designed to deliver savings on seniors' monthly drug bills by encouraging competition among pharmacies, insurance companies and

drug companies. Some critics have questioned whether savings will be significant.

The forum at the Kendall County Senior Center was sponsored by Rep. Hastert, R-Ill. Hastert, McClellan, Senate Majority Bill Frist, R-Tenn., and other Republican lawmakers and administration officials fanned out across the country Monday to promote the new cards, the first widely available benefit from the Medicare prescription drug law enacted last year.

Democrats put their spin on things, as well, with U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin also cautioning seniors against rushing to buy one of the new discount drug cards.

"Frankly, as soon as you sign up and pay your fee, you're stuck for a year," he said during a news conference at a Chicago pharmacy with two other Democratic members of the Illinois congressional delegation. "What may look like an appealing discount for a drug right now might, in fact, disappear in the next week."

Durbin said the early rollout of discount cards is likely to confuse seniors.

"They're being swamped with information right now from private companies that offer these cards," U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Chicago, said. "That information describes the size of the discount and the drugs that are being covered. But is this really what we want for our seniors - a mailbox stuffed with glossy brochures from drug companies?"

Also joining Durbin was Chicago Congressman Rahm Emanuel, who advocates the re-importation of cheaper drugs from Canada, and Bea Lumpkin of the Illinois Alliance for Retired Americans. All agreed that Illinoisans may be better off using a new state program that offers drug discounts to people 65 and older and the disabled.

Eligible participants can be in both the Illinois Rx Buying Club and a Medicare-approved discount drug plan.

As of April 25, there were 64,500 people enrolled in the Illinois plan, a spokeswoman for Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich said. Participants pay \$25 a year and save an average 21 percent on their prescriptions through state-negotiated savings.

At an event in Washington, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson called the federal cards "a giant step forward on the road to savings," especially for low-income older and disabled Americans who qualify for a \$600 subsidy.

Thompson predicted that card sponsors and pharmaceutical companies will be watching Medicare's new prescription-price comparison Web site and will lower prices to attract Medicare recipients. "They are going to be very, very cognizant of what other people are charging," he said.

Enrollment forms are available from card sponsors, Medicare and some pharmacies.

Acknowledging there will be "a few bumps in the road," Thompson encouraged people to compare prices for a couple of weeks before signing up for one of 40 national and 33 regional cards.

Hastert and McClellan answered some basic questions about the program: It is voluntary, and the enrollment fee ranges from free to \$30. The most appropriate card for a person depends on what drugs the person takes, where the person lives and whether he or she is open to getting drugs through the mail.

The atmosphere of the question-and-answer session turned frosty when Carol Applebaugh, 67, stood up in the audience and said she could find no cost savings on several popular drugs in her research through Medicare's Web site.

"All we asked for was affordable prescription drugs. What we got was a \$500 billion boondoggle," she said, referring to last year's Medicare overhaul.

Mike Ramsey of Copley News Service in Chicago contributed to this report.