

On Monday, I hosted a town hall meeting in Waldorf to discuss the looming prescription drug deadline. My Democratic colleagues and I have requested that the Bush Administration extend the penalty-free enrollment deadline for the new Medicare prescription drug law from tomorrow to January 1, 2007, so that seniors can have more time to navigate this confusing and complicated law.

For many seniors and people with disabilities, prescription drugs are essential to their health and well-being. Unfortunately, Republicans have created a program that is impossible to understand. Now, the Bush Administration wants to penalize seniors for not being able to comprehend their own confusing program. With the deadline upon us, it is unfair that seniors who are unable to navigate through the 47 different plans offered by 19 different companies are given a lifetime penalty.

And no wonder seniors are confused. The Government Accountability Office recently issued a report finding that information provided by the federal government was beyond the comprehension of most seniors, and answers given were inaccurate one-third of the time. In response to the critical question of which plan offered the lowest cost for a given list of drugs, Medicare hotline operators failed to provide the correct answer 60% of the time.

Furthermore, the Kaiser Family Foundation found that only 55% of seniors know about the May 15 deadline. The rest either did not know there was a deadline, or had incorrect information about it.

Extending the deadline for enrollment will ensure that more than 200,000 seniors and people with disabilities in Maryland are not forced to pay the Bush prescription drug tax and higher premiums for life.

With the deadline looming, about 5.7 million seniors and people with disabilities eligible for the drug program have not signed up. Government officials and outside advocates say the response has been lowest among those who stand to reap the greatest benefit from the program: the one-third of senior citizens who are low-income.

Families USA, an advocacy group, estimates that fewer than one in four low-income senior citizens have enrolled, despite expensive government outreach to educate people. Extending the deadline would allow this benefit to reach some of the seniors overlooked during the President's public relations frenzy.

In fact, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office estimates that 1 million more beneficiaries would choose to enroll this year if the deadline is extended. "We estimate that about 1 million of those beneficiaries [who have not enrolled yet] would enroll in Part D in 2006 (i.e. sooner than they would have otherwise) if the initial enrollment period were extended through the end of this calendar year," its findings read.

Let me be clear. Democrats wanted a different law. We wanted to simply add a prescription drug benefit to the existing Medicare program. And we wanted it run exactly like the Medicare Part B seniors already knew: in which they pay 20 percent and Medicare pays 80 percent.

I opposed this badly flawed prescription drug plan because it was confusing and illogical, and did not do enough to make medicines more affordable for Medicare recipients. For example, the law outrageously prohibits the Secretary of Health and Human Services from negotiating lower drug prices on behalf of the 40 million seniors enrolled in Medicare, even though similar types of negotiations currently in practice at the Veterans Administration (VA) saves them over 40% on many medicines.

In turn, the Republican plan has been a confusing and frustrating experience for many—and I will do everything in my power to help seniors from the 5th Congressional district avoid a lifetime penalty.

Because this prescription drug plan is the law of the land, I encourage seniors to examine all of their options in the remaining hours. For individualized assistance, I urge seniors to contact representatives at the State Health Insurance Assistance Program (301-475-4200 x 1050 in St. Mary's).