



For Immediate Release
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**Hearing Statement of Senator Max Baucus (D-Mont.)
Regarding the Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit**

The book of Leviticus instructs: “Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly, and revere your God.”

Today we continue our examination into whether Medicare’s prescription drug program is rising to the needs of its beneficiaries, and showing sufficient respect for America’s seniors.

Last week, we heard from beneficiary advocates and pharmacists. They confirmed that America’s seniors need Medicare’s prescription drug program to get affordable drug coverage.

We heard that the program has enrolled more than 22 million seniors. Before the program, many of these seniors did not have coverage. And now, surveys show that 80 percent of seniors are satisfied with the program. By these measures, the program has been a success.

But last week, we also heard some troubling reports. We heard about a pattern that we have been hearing about since the program started. It’s a pattern of poor administrative planning. It’s a pattern of weak oversight of private plans. And it’s a pattern of failure to respond to the seniors whom Congress intended the program to serve.

We heard again about the problems that agencies and private plans have sharing data. The left hand is not talking to the right.

We heard of administrative mix-ups that have led the government to withhold the wrong amount from millions of Social Security checks. Mix-ups have led low-income seniors not to get the benefits for which they are eligible. And these seniors have thus not been able to afford their prescriptions. These mix-ups have meant uncertainty and hardship for many.

Last week, we heard about the confusion caused by rampant marketing. We heard how seniors who only want prescription drug coverage are ending up enrolled in Medicare Advantage plans that they do not understand. We heard that private plans are being allowed to operate without sufficient control.

Tobey Schule, a pharmacist from my home state of Montana, told us how seniors there have to choose among 50 plans. He told us how confusing that is. And he told how many of his patients have ended up in a plan that is not the best plan for them, based on the drugs that they need.

Tobey also described how a senior may pick a plan because it covers a certain drug. But then the plan can remove that drug from its formulary. This forces seniors to change medications. Plans are overruling the doctor's medical decisions and the patient's choice, in search of savings.

Last week, we heard how seniors who have a problem with the program cannot get answers. One witness described how seniors are "shunted" from one place to another. They get passed around among agencies and private plans. And they never get their problems solved.

We are aided in our oversight efforts today by the Government Accountability Office. Today they will unveil their report on challenges in enrolling dual-eligible beneficiaries — a particularly vulnerable population.

We're not here today to place blame. But this Committee will hold administrators responsible. We're here today to find out why problems are occurring. We're here today to hear what the plans are doing to fix them. And we are here to determine what the Committee needs to do to ensure that the benefit is serving all seniors.

I expect two things from those entrusted to run our programs: responsibility and honesty.

As for responsibility, we all need to remember that Congress created this program to serve America's seniors. We are the hired hands. They are our bosses.

They deserve careful planning that considers their needs. They deserve regulators who keep a watchful eye over private plans. They deserve administrators who respond to their concerns. In short, they deserve respect.

Congress set up the program so that plans are an important part. But the bottom line is that many plans answer to stockholders. And we here today answer to the public. It is our responsibility to make sure that we put the interests of seniors first.

As for honesty, I've said from the very beginning of this program that I expect administrators to be forthcoming. If there's a problem, tell us about it. And tell us how you plan to fix it. If an immediate solution is not possible, then we can find another way, even if it requires legislation.

So let us make this hearing the first step towards making honest and responsible improvements in Medicare's prescription drug program. Let us make sure that the program is showing sufficient respect for America's seniors. And let us ensure that the benefit is doing what it was designed to do, to improve the health and wellbeing of America's seniors.

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