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House of Representatives

The House met at 12:30 p.m. and was called to order by the Speaker pro tempore (Mr. BURNS).

DESIGNATION OF THE SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

The SPEAKER pro tempore laid before the House the following communication from the Speaker:

WASHINGTON, DC,

May 4, 2004.

I hereby appoint the Honorable MAX BURNS to act as Speaker pro tempore on this day.

J. DENNIS HASTERT,

Speaker of the House of Representatives.

MORNING HOUR DEBATES

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 20, 2004, the Chair will now recognize Members from lists submitted by the majority and minority leaders for morning hour debates. The Chair will alternate recognition between the parties, with each party limited to not to exceed 30 minutes, and each Member, except the majority leader, the minority leader, or the minority whip, limited to not to exceed 5 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. PALLONE) for 5 minutes.

PRESCRIPTION DRUG DISCOUNT CARDS

Mr. PALLONE. Mr. Speaker, this week seniors nationwide will begin to see how ineffective and confusing the Republican prescription drug legislation is. This week, seniors have the opportunity to sign up for a new prescription drug card that will provide supposed savings on prescription drug costs.

The program begins on June 1; and while the new Medicare law will not take effect until 2006, it is clear that these drug cards are being used as a

ploy to enroll beneficiaries into products sponsored by the private drug and insurance industry.

Mr. Speaker, while some seniors will be able to save on their medications when they use these cards, many will not. In fact, I believe these drugs cards are nothing more than window dressing, a weak attempt by the Bush administration to couch the true intent of this Medicare law.

As seniors will see in the upcoming weeks, there is no guaranteed discount from drug card sponsors. Medicare discount cards are being marketed as providing a 10 to 25 percent discount, but there is no requirement in the new law that card sponsors must offer any specific discount. The idea of any savings is merely an illusion. Prescription costs rose 17 percent alone last year and drug prices are reported to have increased dramatically between the beginning of the year and now, so any savings have been lost to drug cost inflation.

Mr. Speaker, I would point out secondly, there is no guarantee that a particular drug card will offer discounts on all of the medicines taken by seniors. Card sponsors are allowed to pick and choose which drugs will be discounted. In addition, card sponsors may change the discounted prices on medicines weekly.

The discounts on a seniors' medicine when advertised when he or she enrolled may change, but that senior will not be allowed to switch to a different card for one whole year. So imagine that, Mr. Speaker, a card sponsor can change prices any time they want, but seniors have to stick with the same drug card for an entire year.

There is also no guarantee access to any particular pharmacy. Each discount card sponsor will determine which pharmacies will offer the discount advertised with the card. A seniors' usual pharmacy may not participate in the card that he or she selects.

Finally, the final price paid for prescriptions will vary by pharmacy. Because pharmacies can change the prices they charge, seniors must check with each of their local participating pharmacies to find out which one offers the lowest price on the drugs covered under their card.

Mr. Speaker, I would ask, how are seniors supposed to decipher all of this information that I mentioned. You would hope they would be able to get it from the Department of Health and Human Services; but that agency is too busy these days producing commercials trying to sell the new prescription drug law, rather than providing reliable information that seniors can use. Consider that drug cards sponsors are now saying that information on the Health and Human Services Web site designed to help seniors shop for the right card contains false information.

Mr. Speaker, if Health and Human Services cannot get the information right, how can we expect seniors to decide which plans works best for them?

Mr. Speaker, seniors should carefully consider their options. Unfortunately, they must remember that the Bush administration and Congressional Republicans were more concerned about how this legislation would affect the pharmaceutical companies than they were about how it would affect America's seniors. Seniors should remember that Democrats continue our fight to lower prescription drug costs by giving the government the purchasing power of millions of seniors to negotiate drug costs and to allow safe reimportation of drugs from Canada and elsewhere.

Mr. Speaker, I have said many times that this Medicare prescription drug law should simply be repealed and we should go back to the drawing board. This idea of having these discount cards is too confusing and it will not result in lower drug prices for seniors. Imagine that they have to wait another 2 years after that before the

□ This symbol represents the time of day during the House proceedings, e.g., □ 1407 is 2:07 p.m.

Matter set in this typeface indicates words inserted or appended, rather than spoken, by a Member of the House on the floor.



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