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February 11, 2006

Daily Southtown

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Dems look to alter new Medicare plan

Three Illinois Democrats staged a mock congressional hearing Friday in Chicago Friday to call for changes in the new Medicare prescription drug benefit for the elderly and the disabled.

Reps. Daniel Lipinski (3rd), Bobby Rush (1st) and Jan Schakowsky (9th) responded to widespread confusion and glitches in the weeks since it went live Jan. 1 - and capitalized on the fact that the 2003 law was crafted by Republicans.

The lawmakers unveiled a report alleging that Medicare beneficiaries and taxpayers are paying higher drug prices because private insurance companies, rather than the government, administer the coverage.

Rush, noting that neither he nor anyone in the room voted for the law, called the public-private partnership the "pharmaceutical protection component."

Critics have long complained that the program is a giveaway to insurance and drug companies. The government, they say, could have negotiated lower prices from drug companies but diluted its massive buying power among insurance companies.

"As everyone knows, when you buy in bulk, you get a better price," Lipinski said.

Both Rush and Lipinski face challengers in the March primary.

According to the Democrats' new report, the 10 most commonly purchased drugs - including painkiller Celebrex and Fosamax, prescribed to reverse bone loss - cost 80 percent more through some Medicare plans than through the government's coverage for veterans.

Democrats have introduced two sets of bills in the House and Senate that would change the program. One set would replace the program with a uniform benefit administered by the federal government. The other would leave the basic structure intact but extend the enrollment period from May 15 through the end of the year and allow enrollees to switch plans if they change their minds.

President Bush, meanwhile, has applauded the influence of competition among insurers because many of the Medicare drug plans are more generous than the minimum coverage outlined in the law.

Lipinski, Rush and Schakowsky listened to testimony from three constituents and from representatives of community organizations and the National Pharmacists Association, who relayed difficulties helping clients navigate the program.

"Many individuals are repeatedly falling through the cracks in the system," said Tannisse Joyce, a case manager for Lutheran Social Services of Illinois.

During an official hearing Wednesday in Washington before the Senate Finance Committee, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services director Mark McClellan admitted "growing pains" with the rollout, including inadequate customer service and glitches moving Medicaid beneficiaries into Medicare plans.

McClellan rejected calls for wholesale changes in the program.