



SENIORS ASK: WHAT HAPPENED TO REPUBLICAN PROMISES?

Republicans, who control both chambers of Congress and the White House, set October 17th as the deadline for producing the Medicare prescription drug bill they promised seniors. Now that the day has arrived, Republicans are producing only empty assurances that they have “come a long way.”

And to make matters worse for seniors, news reports show that the little progress that has been made is in the wrong direction. Conferees are considering a drug benefit that will be unaffordable for most seniors and leaves a big gap in coverage. The President has expressed his support for excluding the poorest and most vulnerable seniors from receiving this benefit, those eligible for Medicaid. Even worse, conferees are plotting to change the fundamental nature of the entire Medicare program, so that it is no longer a program for all seniors, but will be means-tested by income and possibly capped. Lastly, House Republicans continue to insist that Medicare must begin competing with private health care plans in 2010 (premium support), which would mean the end of a guaranteed health care program for seniors.

Please read below for a review of the promises made and not kept by Republicans and the bad news on the little progress made to date.

A Deadline Made and a Deadline Missed

“House and Senate Republican conferees to the Medicare reform and prescription drug legislation emerged from a Sept. 24 closed meeting with House and Senate Republican leaders Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) and Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) with an Oct. 17 deadline by which to complete negotiations. According to a proposed agenda distributed at the meeting, ‘finishing the conference agreement by this date will ensure that the report can be considered by both the House and Senate before the first session of the 108th Congress adjourns.’”

– [HealthLine, 9/26/03]

“I’m absolutely confident we’re going to have a bill.”

– Sen. Bill Frist [AP, 09/04/03]

“This is an issue of vital importance to senior citizens all across our country. They have waited years for a modern Medicare system and they should not have to wait any longer.”

– President George Bush [CBS News, 6/29/03]

“‘We agreed on a glide path of Oct. 17 to have a conference bill completed,’ Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, a Tennessee Republican, told reporters.”

– Sen. Bill Frist [Reuters, 09/24/03]

“Senate Majority Leader Frist, who has pushed hard for meeting the Friday deadline, would only say leaders would ‘see where we are’ Friday on [Medicare Prescription Drug Legislation].”

– [CongressDaily, 10/15/03]

“By the 17th [of October] we ought to have something pretty well put together.”

– Sen. Orrin Hatch [Newsday, 10/05/03]

“We’ve come a long way, but we still have a long way to go.”

– Sen. Orrin Hatch [CongressDaily, 10/17/03]

“While plenty of meetings and negotiations remain, I am confident that Chairman Thomas, Chairman Tauzin, Chairman Grassley and the other Conferees will finish their work with a product of which we can all be proud. I fully expect that later this fall we will send the President legislation he can sign into law that strengthens Medicare for the future and provides seniors much-needed prescription drug coverage. With results like these, you can see why House Republicans are ready to get home to tell our story.”

– Speaker Dennis Hastert [Press Release, 07/25/03]

“It’s important for Republicans to deliver. We campaigned on this.”

– Rep. Jack Kingston [Washington Times, 06/27/03]

“This [Medicare bill] is a top concern for the American people, especially for senior citizens. We have a great opportunity to push this legislation past the finish line and get it signed into law by the President. I have a simple request to make of these conferees: Let’s get it done. Let’s get it signed into law on behalf of America’s seniors and their families.”

– Speaker Dennis Hastert [Press Release, 07/10/03]

“I pledge to the Chairman and to the Vice Chairman of the Conference that I will do all I can to help complete this legislation. I do so as a member of this Committee, as the Majority Leader of the United States Senate and, perhaps above all, as a physician who has treated thousands of Medicare patients, who has spent years working in hospitals, and who has written thousands of prescriptions that I knew might go unfilled because patients simply could not afford them.”

– Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist [Website, 07/15/03]

“Let [your elected representative] know that we expect to plow through the doubts and the obstacles and get a good bill to the president’s desk. My pen is ready. I’m ready to sign a good bill.”

– President Bush [Remarks, 07/30/03]

Heading in the Wrong Direction

“The Senate majority leader, Bill Frist of Tennessee, said the Medicare negotiators had ‘a mandate’ to charge affluent people somewhat more.”

– [New York Times, 10/11/03]

“House Majority Leader Tom DeLay yesterday drew a line in the sand by saying, hours before the Medicare conference committee opened, that House Republicans will not accept a bill that doesn’t force Medicare to compete directly with private health care plans by 2010.”

– [Washington Times, 07/16/03]

“Rep. Jim DeMint, South Carolina Republican, said he is confident the president will weigh in on the issue ‘either visibly or under the radar.’ Mr. DeMint said that it has been the president’s vision all along to introduce competition with the new drug benefit...”

– [Washington Times, 07/16/03]

“Without the reforms [to compete against private health plans starting in 2010] in the House-passed bill, we’re not going to be supporting the conference report.”

– Rep. Patrick J. Toomey [Washington Times, 09/15/03]

“House and Senate negotiators trying to finalize a Medicare drug benefit said Wednesday they are considering charging wealthy people higher premiums for Part B of Medicare, which covers doctors and outpatient services...‘We’re looking at less subsidies for high-income people in Part B,’ said Oklahoma Republican Don Nickles.”

– [Reuters, 10/16/03]

“President Bush intervened directly last week for the first time in congressional negotiations over the future of Medicare, telephoning Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist to warn that he opposed the direction lawmakers appeared to be taking [on including dual eligibles] in a bid to provide drug benefits to poor, elderly people, according to several congressional sources.”

– [The Washington Post, 10/08/03]

“[T]he Bush administration [prefers] to leave the poorest elderly in Medicaid...”

– [Reuters, 10/01/03]

“In the House, conservatives are angry because they view the drug benefit as an expensive add-on that is little more than a ‘drug giveaway,’ as Rep. Sam Johnson (R-Texas) called it. ‘If it doesn’t reform Medicare, it’s not worth doing,’ Johnson said.”

– [AP, 07/14/03]