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Government's failure to provide information are cause for extension

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Washington, DC - Congresswoman Doris O. Matsui (CA-5) called for extending the May 15th Medicare Part D enrollment deadline, citing recent reports that demonstrate the inherent problems with the program. The reports were by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the House Government Reform Committee and a poll by and the Kaiser Family Foundation, all of which substantiate what seniors have been experiencing for months — this is an extremely complex program, and the government is not doing enough to help seniors make an informed decision.

“America’s seniors will be forced to absorb more than \$3 billion in penalties over the next ten years if Congress does not extend the May 15th deadline. It is unconscionable for Congress to pass up an opportunity to avoid hitting those on a fixed-income with such penalties,” stated Congresswoman Matsui. According to polls, many seniors are not even aware of the deadline. Others are struggling to understand their options in time to avoid penalties. And it does not help that CMS is giving 4 in 10 callers incorrect information about which plan best suits their needs. Our seniors deserve more time.”

The GAO’s review notes that the available information resources — the federal handbooks, website and 1-800-Medicare hotline — all failed to provide information that was “consistently clear, complete, accurate and usable.” A poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation, reports that, despite a nationwide campaign by government and private organizations, nearly half of potential beneficiaries are unaware that May 15th is the cutoff to enroll in a drug plan without penalty.

Additionally, an analysis of California’s 5th district performed by the staff of the House Government Reform Committee examines the impact on drug prices of the provision prohibiting the government from negotiating with the pharmaceutical companies. The report found that in Sacramento, drug prices offered by these private plans under Medicare Part D are more than 3% higher than the drugs available at Costco, and almost 80% higher than prices negotiated for our veterans by the federal government.

Continued Congresswoman Matsui, “Adding insult to injury the House will devote floor time to the Medicare prescription drug benefit. Unfortunately, the meaningless resolution is about what seniors should do. when it should be

about what Congress should do. How will this resolution help seniors trying to navigate the complex maze that is the Medicare prescription drug benefit? Congresswoman Matsui supports two pieces of legislation that if enacted would make critical changes to the program, ensuring the benefit helps those it is intended to help. Quick passage of the Medicare Informed Choice Act, H.R. 3861 would extend the enrollment period beyond Monday's deadline of May 15, 2006, letting seniors have until the end of 2006 to make a decision. Additionally, she supports changing the law to allow the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to negotiate lower prescription drug prices and maximize seniors's savings – the Republican prescription drug law explicitly prohibits CMS from doing so.

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