

Washington, DC -- Seniors age 65 and older make up 26 percent of the people in Florida's 13th Congressional District. That is the largest percentage of seniors in any district in the nation. I am working in Congress to strengthen and stabilize the federal health care program to meet the needs of the District's 176,721 Medicare beneficiaries and future generations.

In 2003, Congress passed legislation to help pay the prescription drug costs for millions of Florida seniors by adding a voluntary prescription drug benefit to Medicare. Medicare Part D went into effect Jan. 1, 2006 and has helped lower drug costs for millions of Florida seniors – but there is room for improvement.

Earlier this year, I voted for a bill strongly endorsed by AARP to help lower prescription drug costs for seniors by requiring Medicare to negotiate with drug companies for the best available prices. This is common-sense legislation that could save taxpayers money and lower prescription drug costs for the thousands of seniors in my District.

In the meantime, a recent survey conducted for AARP found that most of the seniors enrolled in Medicare Part D are happy with their prescription drug benefit -- many saying that prescription drugs are more affordable now than they were prior to their enrollment. The October 2007 survey found that about two-thirds of respondents with Medicare Part D coverage said they think their prescription drugs are much more affordable (20%), somewhat more affordable (24%), or just as affordable (19%) as they were before their enrollment. About two-thirds said the savings they received were better or about the same as they had expected.

The annual open enrollment for Medicare Part D began on November 15, 2007 and ends December 31, 2007 for coverage effective January 1, 2008. During open enrollment, Medicare eligible seniors have until the end of December to enroll for the first time in the Medicare prescription drug benefit or switch from their current benefit to another plan.

I encourage seniors in the 13th Congressional District to review the available plans and choose the one that provides them with the most help with their drug costs. In Florida, several private companies are competing for your business. Of the 58 plans they offer, there are 33 with no deductibles and eight with premiums under \$20 a month. There are also 16 plans that reduce out-of-pocket expenses by covering generics once seniors reach a gap in coverage between the initial coverage and catastrophic coverage referred to as the "donut hole".

There are 135,000 people in the 13th District already benefiting from the Medicare Modernization Act, which provided seniors with drug coverage. Medicare beneficiaries who want to keep your current plan don't need to take any action. But some of you may be able to save money by changing plans for 2008. There may be a plan that covers the same drugs as your current plan but for less money. Maybe your current plan has changed the list of drugs it covers or your prescriptions have changed and you need a different plan that covers your new medications.

Information regarding the prescription drug program is available online at www.medicare.gov or by calling Medicare at 1.800.MEDICARE. For help choosing a plan, seniors may contact Serving Health Insurance Needs of Elders (SHINE) at 1.800.963.5337. When calling for assistance, make sure to have your Medicare card, the name and location of your pharmacy, and a list of your medications handy. Low-income seniors should contact the Social Security Administration to apply for additional help, 800-772-1213.

My office can also provide seniors with information on the Medicare prescription drug program or assist seniors experiencing problems with Medicare or any federal agency. Seniors, their families and care-givers may call my office in Sarasota at 941.951.6643 or Bradenton at 941.747.9081.