

I am encouraged that Congress is finally working to provide relief to our nation's seniors; however, the bill under consideration today does not do enough to help them. The only bill the Republicans offer, HR 4680, relies too much on private insurers who have already expressed opposition to providing drug coverage and who have already failed to provide adequate health insurance for many areas of the country, particularly rural areas.

Prescription drugs are an increasingly vital part of health care and are the fastest growing component of health care expenditures. Spending on prescription drugs is expected to reach \$112 billion this year alone. Seniors, only 13% of the total population, account for more than a third of the annual expenditure. The average senior uses 18 prescriptions a year, prescriptions essential to their quality of life.

The rising costs of pharmaceuticals combined with the increasing reliance on drugs for medical treatments have created a serious threat to the financial security of a vulnerable population, seniors on fixed incomes.

The alternative legislation supported by the Administration and Congressional Democrats would do more to alleviate some of the financial burden imposed by prescription medications. The substitute bill, which was, unfortunately, prohibited from consideration today, offers coverage through the Medicare program that uses the purchasing power of the federal government to guarantee affordable prescription drug prices. Our seniors are paying the highest prescription drug prices in the world, not just in comparison with Canada, Mexico and other countries, but also with comparable medications offered to animals in veterinary clinics. The Republican proposal offers no guarantees that seniors who are purchasing drug coverage are being offered the best possible price for their pharmaceuticals.

The debate today on perhaps the most important domestic issue of this Congress has been haphazard and rushed. Consequently, it is likely that even if passed, the Administration will veto HR 4680. However, I hope the debate today is the beginning of a truly bi-partisan conversation about how we can focus our efforts beyond election year politics to a proposal that makes a real difference for those who depend on prescription drugs for their quality of life.