

Tuesday, June 24, 2003

We lead, nation retreats

Groundbreaking healthcare initiatives in Maine

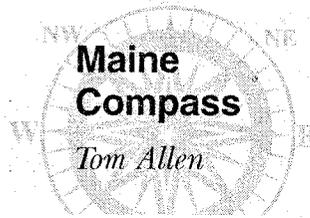
"On Health Care, Maine Leads," the headline of an editorial in the June 19 edition of *The New York Times* proclaimed. The reference to our state's Latin motto, *Dirigo*, (which means "I lead") may have been lost on many of the newspaper's readers, but they could not miss the editorial's message: While the federal government drags its feet, Maine has led the nation in tackling the tough problems associated with providing all of our citizens access to quality, affordable health care.

Our groundbreaking initiatives include the Maine Rx program to rein in skyrocketing prescription drug prices and Gov. John Baldacci's *Dirigo* Health initiative to create the nation's first universal health care system. Ironically, on the same day the *Times* celebrated Maine's leadership, the House Committee on Energy and Commerce (on which I serve) completed work on a bill euphemistically titled the Medicare Prescription Drug and Modernization Act. This measure purports to solve a pressing national problem — prescription drug coverage for seniors — but actually undermines the only Medicare plan available in Maine.

Maine is leading the country in one direction on health care, while in Congress, the House majority marches in another.

The underlying differences in values are instructive. In Maine, we are willing to share risks and responsibilities to solve a common problem — thousands of our citizens are without adequate health care. In Congress, the current majority wants individuals to deal separately with insurance companies to "choose" the best plan for them, even if this means no care or inadequate care for others.

I believe that every American senior, whether living in a big city or a rural Maine town, deserves a prescription drug benefit that won't evaporate or change in the future. But under the bill sponsored by House Republican leaders, seniors' premiums, co-pays and choice of drugs may change from year to year and from state to state. The bill also contains an enormous gap in coverage



that will force seniors to pay 100 percent of their drug costs between \$2,000 and \$3,500 a year.

Driven by an apparent desire to end traditional fee-for-service Medicare, sponsors are insisting on forcing seniors into unreliable private insurance plans. Our disastrous experience with private Medicare+ Choice plans during the last decade proves that the private health market won't work for seniors in rural, sparsely populated states. The House Republican bill will leave millions of seniors in rural states like Maine with second-class coverage when private insurers find they cannot make enough money here. The prospects are poor even in more urban states, since insurance companies have shown little interest in creating risky, stand-alone drug coverage plans.

The House bill does nothing to control drug costs. Moreover, it actually prohibits federal officials from negotiating with pharmaceutical companies for lower prices. While Maine stood up to the pharmaceutical companies, fighting for the Maine Rx program all the way to the Supreme Court, Congress consistently buckles under their pressure. Seniors will quickly see that the House Republican bill does not go into effect until 2006, offers anemic benefits and, most alarmingly of all, privatizes Medicare in 2010 by converting it into a "voucher-type system that will rob seniors of the stability and predictability Medicare has provided them since 1965.

Congressional Democrats offer a simpler, more comprehensive alternative. It would ensure that all Medicare recipients, whether they live in Dayton, Maine or Dayton, Ohio, will get their prescriptions covered through

The House bill does nothing to control drug costs. Moreover, it actually prohibits federal officials from negotiating with pharmaceutical companies for lower prices.

the same Medicare system they know and trust. The funds Congress allocates for prescription drug coverage would help seniors to purchase the medications their doctors prescribe, not to subsidize insurance companies.

There is a glimmer of hope in the Senate. The Senate Finance Committee reported a very different, bipartisan bill. While I have reservations about many of its provisions, I am encouraged that this bill, recognizing that private plans won't work in rural states, contains a fallback provision that assures all seniors a prescription drug benefit through traditional Medicare when private plans are not available. However, there is no guarantee that even this provision will make it through a House-Senate conference.

While House Republicans say "modernization" but mean "privatization, the Democrats' plan strengthens Medicare, truly brings it into the 21st century, and provides what America's seniors want, need and deserve: fair, stable, predictable, equitable and affordable prescription drug coverage. This is a far better way to lead, because we all do better when we work together.

Congressman Tom Allen represents Maine's First District in the U.S. House of Representatives. His e-mail address is rep.tomallen@mail.house.gov.