

For Immediate Release



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## **Message to Seniors on Prescription Drug Plan: Take Notice, Sign Up, Save Money**

### **Secretary Leavitt's Bus Tour to Raise Awareness Asks Seniors and Community Leaders to Educate Themselves in Time for Program Roll Out**

Margate, FL Wednesday, June 22, 2005– Monday, June 20<sup>th</sup>, Mike Leavitt, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services made a stop at Margate's Northwest Focal Point Senior Center to urge community leaders and seniors to prepare for a new drug plan, under Medicare, that could save them money.

Secretary Leavitt began his conversation with community leaders by saying "this is a very big deal, it could affect 41 million people and we only have 11 months to reach them." The fact that there had been much debate over the Medicare Modernization Act was not overlooked. Both Vice Mayor Ben Graber and Secretary Leavitt noted that despite the political debate of the past regarding this plan, the program is now law and it's time to move forward.

While this bus tour begins the process of informing seniors and those who work with senior issues, Leavitt advised community leaders that the struggle to educate the public is dependant upon them. This plan is "very much a grass roots movement," he explained. He urged leaders to "please come together as a community to educate the public. People in your area need your help."

Broward County Vice Mayor Ben Graber, offered another perspective by saying, "I'm a democrat and I support it, I'd like to see it succeed." He noted that it may not be a perfect plan but it is a start. "Not everyone will benefit, but many will."

Another guest on the bus tour was Florida Secretary of Health, Dr. John Agwunobi, who added insight on why the program is so important for this state. "A number of people will qualify and in Florida, that means about one-fourth of the citizens in the state." As Florida Health Officer, he's looking for "the state to become healthier and healthier" as times passes.

Secretary Leavitt discussed all the key points of the new prescription benefit. He framed the presentation as a reporter would by addressing the most important questions: who, what, when, how, and why. The program is for anyone over 65 years of age or who is disabled. It's a plan that can make sure seniors have access to the prescription drugs that they need. The tour's purpose is

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to raise awareness so that seniors get the necessary information on how they can save money on prescription drugs. As to how, he advised the audience to expect to hear a lot of information over the next 11 months, “today I just want you to know it is coming” he said. In the future, “look to your local senior centers, churches, and neighbors” for educated advice... “it’s got to be a big National discussion.”

“What does it cost?” one audience member asked. Many Americans on a fixed income or lower income won’t pay anything, explained Leavitt. What you pay is determined on a sliding scale, depending on your income. Some may pay \$30-40 dollars per month. And an estimated one-third of Americans will pay nothing, he added.

When applicants sign up, they will fill out a 16-question form which will be available from the Social Security Administration. Our motto is “when in doubt, fill it out” Leavitt said. If you wait until you need it to use it will cost more money. Open enrollment is November 2005 through May 15, 2006 and program coverage will begin on January 1, 2006. The Secretary encouraged all attendees to learn more by calling 1-800-Medicare or log on to [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov).

The following is some information extracted from literature provided by the Department of Health and Human Services at the Town Hall meeting:

**What does Medicare Prescription Drug Coverage do for me?** It provides qualified applicants with insurance coverage for prescription drugs, it pays for brand name and generic drugs, and offers a choice of plans.

**Who can join?** Anyone with Medicare Part A **and/or** Part B can join a Medicare prescription drug plan offered in their area.

**How does the coverage work?** Medicare Prescription Drug Coverage is insurance. Private companies provide the coverage. You choose the drug plan and pay a monthly premium. When you join a plan, Medicare helps pay the bill.

**Who qualifies?** If your annual **income** is below \$14,355 for a single person (or \$19,245 if you are married and living with your spouse), you may qualify for extra help. Slightly higher income levels may apply if you provide ½ support to other family members living with you, or if you work or reside in Alaska and Hawaii.

And if your **resources** (including your savings and stocks, but not counting your home or car) are under \$11,500 (for a single person) or under \$23,000 (for a married couple) you may qualify for extra help paying for your Medicare prescription drug costs.

**Important Dates:**

In October 2005 watch the mail for the *Medicare & You* handbook.

November 15, 2005 is the first day you can join a plan.

January 1, 2006 Coverage begins for those who join by December 31, 2005.

May 15, 2006 is the last day to join a plan without paying a penalty. If you don’t join a Medicare prescription drug plan by May 15, 2006, you will pay a higher premium unless you have drug coverage that, on average, is at least as good as standard Medicare prescription drug coverage (such as from a former employer or union).

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