Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 3, 2006

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NEW GAO REPORT FINDS WIDESPREAD PROBLEMS WITH INFORMATION PROVIDED BY BUSH ADMINISTRATION ABOUT NEW MEDICARE DRUG BENEFIT

WASHINGTON, D.C. — A new GAO report released today by Rep. Henry A. Waxman, Rep. John D. Dingell, Rep. Charles B. Rangel, Rep. Pete Stark, and Rep. Sherrod Brown finds that the information provided by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services about the complicated new drug benefit is rife with problems. According to GAO, the federal handbooks, website, and 1-800 Medicare hotline failed to provide information that was "consistently clear, complete, accurate, and usable."

"The Bush Administration put seniors last when designing the Medicare drug plan," said Rep. Waxman, Ranking Member on Government Reform. "And now the Administration is failing to provide seniors with clear, accurate, and complete information about their options. It's no wonder that millions of seniors are frustrated and confused."

"The Bush Administration needs to accept the GAO's findings on the Medicare drug benefit and act immediately to ensure that the information it provides to seniors is accurate and understandable — which GAO says is not presently the case," said Rep. Dingell, Ranking Member on Energy and Commerce. "But these findings also point to larger problems. Because of inaccurate or incomprehensible information, seniors haven't been given a fair shake. The President should extend the May15th enrollment deadline and not penalize seniors for the Administration's errors. Seniors can't make good choices if they can't get good information. And these problems confirm that this privatized prescription drug plan is inherently too complicated."

"Part D is the perfect example of the devil being in the details," said Ways and Means Ranking Member Charles B. Rangel. "They've made the program too complicated and beneficiaries are paying the price. These findings make it painfully obvious that we need to fix the Bush drug plan to give seniors and folks with disabilities a simple, reliable prescription drug benefit within Medicare."

"Today's GAO report confirms what we've heard from people across America," said Rep. Stark, Ranking Member on the Ways and Means Health Subcommittee. "More often than not, operators at 1-800-Medicare are giving incomplete or inaccurate information to people asking for help selecting a plan. This report reinforces the need to extend the May 15 enrollment deadline and waive the late enrollment penalty."

"Without reliable customer support, the Part D program isn't just complicated, it's a health care crap shoot," said Rep. Brown, Ranking Member on the Energy and Commerce Committee's Health Subcommittee. "Yet another reason for Republican leaders to delay the May 15th enrollment deadline and rethink their Medicare phase-out strategy."

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Specifically, GAO found:

- Written materials failed to comply with basic guidelines for good communications and were written at an educational level that rendered them unreadable by almost half of all seniors.

- The Medicare website was poorly designed and was so complicated that seniors were typically able to perform less than half of all simple tasks they attempted on the site.

- The 1-800-Medicare hotline provided inaccurate, incomplete, or inappropriate responses to one-third of basic questions.

- On one key question — which plan offered the lowest costs for individuals who take a given set of drugs — the Medicare hotline provided inappropriate, inaccurate, or incomplete answers almost 60% of the time.

On Monday, the Medicare trustees released their latest projections, finding that enrollment for the drug benefit was well below expectations, with one-third of seniors without coverage expected to forego the benefit. Seniors who do not enroll before May 15 face penalties in the form of increased premiums. The confusing nature of the benefit — and the inability of seniors to obtain accurate and understandable information about it — is blamed by many experts for the low enrollment.

For GAO's report and the fact sheet, please visit www.democrats.reform.house.gov.