

WASHINGTON, D.C. - The United States House of Representatives is expected to take up the Medicare Modernization And Prescription Drug Act (H.R. 4954) later this week. Representative Xavier Becerra (CA - 30), the only congressional member from Southern California who is on the House Ways and Means Committee, which has jurisdiction over Medicare, has publicly denounced H.R. 4954, believing that it does nothing to ease seniors' pocketbooks and leads the government down a path toward Medicare privatization.

Rather than creating a guaranteed federal prescription drug program, H.R. 4954 would enable the government to spend \$310 billion over the next 10 years in federal subsidies to insurance companies who have a prescription drug component that is available to seniors. "We should be subsidizing the cost of seniors' drug payments, not drug companies," Rep. Becerra said. "The government should provide an affordable, comprehensive prescription medication benefit under Medicare that will protect our seniors."

During last week's Ways and Means Committee debate on H.R. 4954, Rep. Becerra offered two amendments that would have strengthened the bill immeasurably. The first amendment would have filled the so-called "donut hole" in the Republican plan, where no benefits are provided between \$2,000 and \$5,600 in drug costs, by providing beneficiaries with 20 percent co-insurance when their expenses fall within this gap. Rep. Becerra's second amendment would have strengthened the special financial assistance for low-income beneficiaries by filling the aforementioned "donut hole" and ensuring that they pay only nominal co-payments on prescription drugs. Unfortunately, both of these amendments were defeated on party-line votes. "This bill just doesn't go far enough in terms of making prescription drugs more affordable for low income seniors on fixed incomes - I want to see more done," Rep. Becerra said.

Rep. Becerra's third amendment, however, may still have a chance to be included in H.R. 4954. It requires the Secretary of Health and Human Services to issue policy guidelines that ensure limited English proficient persons have meaningful access to prescription drug programs and other Medicare services. "If a person's ability to read and speak English is restricted, then no prescription drug program, Republican or Democrat, will be beneficial unless the government addresses the necessary language assistance tools," Rep. Becerra said.

When H.R. 4954 reaches the House floor, the Democratic Caucus will introduce an alternative bill to the Republican prescription drug plan. Rather than subsidize private insurance companies, the Democratic alternative creates a prescription drug program under Medicare that offers all beneficiaries prescription drug coverage beginning in 2005. "The Democratic

## **Rep. Becerra Fights For A Real Prescription Drug Plan Under Medicare**

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alternative does right by our seniors," Rep. Becerra said. "Seniors shouldn't have to choose between buying groceries and buying prescription drugs. Creating a viable prescription drug program under Medicare is the best course of action to ensure that choice will never have to be made again."