Senate Democrats Announce Package to Expand Medicare to Include Dental, Hearing and Vision Benefits

On Tuesday night, top Senate Democrats came to terms on a blueprint for a massive $3.5 trillion budget resolution to pair with a proposed $600 billion bipartisan physical infrastructure plan.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (NY) confirmed that funding to add dental, vision, and hearing benefits to Medicare would be included in the resolution, addressing exclusions that have left millions of older Americans with dental problems and expensive bills for vision and hearing treatments. However, not every member of the Senate Democratic Caucus has endorsed the deal and full details of the plan have not been released.

With Medicare’s anniversary coming up on July 30, the addition of dental, vision, and hearing benefits would represent a substantial modernization and improvement of the program at an opportune time. Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Xavier Becerra said that the Biden administration is in support of this and any improvement Congress is willing to make to Medicare.

"While Medicare has been crucial to providing seniors with guaranteed health coverage for nearly 56 years, there are pieces that have been missing and must be added to provide comprehensive care," said Richard Fiesta, Executive Director of the Alliance. "Older Americans look forward to building on the success Medicare has had over those 56 years and not having to worry that getting a dental check-up, a hearing aid, or a new eyeglasses prescription will lead to financial ruin."
He added, “Those benefits should be paid for by allowing Medicare to negotiate the lower drug prices that seniors so desperately need.”

**President Biden Fires SSA Commissioner Appointed by Trump**

Last Friday President Biden terminated Social Security Commissioner Andrew Saul, and Deputy Commissioner David Black resigned at the President’s request. Biden appointed Kilolo Kijakazi, currently the deputy commissioner for Retirement and Disability at the SSA, to be acting commissioner until a new commissioner and deputy can be named and confirmed by the Senate.

During his tenure, Saul imposed regulations making it harder for thousands of people with disabilities to claim the benefits they were entitled to, and proposed even more. He also antagonized the Social Security Administration workforce that was already stretched thin and dealing with a growing workload as more Americans reach retirement age.

Fiesta applauded President Biden’s action, adding, “The millions of Americans of all ages who rely or will rely on earned Social Security benefits deserve a Social Security Commissioner who actually understands and supports the agency’s mission.”

Fiesta also stated, “With 10,000 Americans turning 65 each day, the hardworking employees of the SSA deserve a leader who will also fight for them and the people of this nation whom they serve.”

**President Biden Signs Executive Order Targeting High Drug Prices**

Last Friday, President Biden signed an executive order to address high drug prices while Congress works on legislation to allow Medicare to negotiate lower prices for prescription drugs.

The executive order:

- Authorizes federal agencies to import prescription drugs from Canada to lower prices;
- Directs the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to increase support for generic and biosimilar drugs, which provide low-cost options for patients;
- Directs HHS to issue a comprehensive plan within 45 days to combat high prescription drug prices and price gouging; and
- Encourages the FTC to ban “pay for delay” and similar tactics used by drug corporations to keep generic drugs off the market.

“Pay for delay” agreements describes the tactics brand-name drug corporations use when they pay generic drug companies not to produce a given drug, keeping the drug price artificially high.

“President Biden understands that drug prices are far too high and we must rein in the pharmaceutical industry,” said Robert Roach, Jr., President of the Alliance. “But we urge Congress not to stop working to pass H.R. 3, the Lower Drug Prices Now Act, which is urgently needed.”

The executive order also directs HHS to issue rules within the next two months to implement a law passed in 2017 to allow hearing aids to be sold over the counter.
Texas State Legislators Flee the State to Preserve Voting Rights

Fifty-one of the 67 Democrats in Texas' state legislature fled the state on Monday to deny the Republican-controlled body the quorum needed to pass a bill that would make it harder for seniors and minority voters to exercise their right to vote. Two flights were chartered from an airport in Austin to Washington, D.C., allowing the Texas legislators to call attention to the need for Congress to pass legislation to ensure voting rights for all eligible Americans.

The Texas Alliance has been at the forefront of the opposition to new restrictive voting laws in their state. Last weekend Texas Alliance member Jan Lance, president of the Austin chapter, stood in line and waited for 20 hours to testify against the bill, finally delivering her statement at 4:00 a.m. Sunday.

On Tuesday President Biden went to the U.S. Constitution Center in Philadelphia and said that the nation's democracy is at risk. Biden sharply criticized former President Trump and other Republicans for failing to acknowledge the result of the past election and continuing to spread lies and conspiracy theories.

“The Texas legislators who came to Washington are heroes who are sounding the alarm,” said Alliance Secretary-Treasurer Joseph Peters, Jr. “We urge the Senate to pass the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, H.R. 4, as an important step in protecting the right to vote.”