

HEALTH CARE

Unions call for Medicare to lower drug prices

On July 30—the 56th anniversary of the establishment of the game-changing Medicare program, Oregon U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley joined AFSCME international president Lee Saunders, Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans president Everice Moro, and several other allies on a Zoom press conference to urge Congress to give Medicare the authority to negotiate lower drug prices directly with pharmaceutical companies — just like other countries do.

Today, Medicare and Medicaid insure one in three Americans.

“We need to recognize that when the market is not working for people, we need to change the rules and un-rig the system,” Saunders said. “That means we need to do something about out-of-control prescription drug costs.”

Sen. Merkley said he hears from constituents all the time—regardless of their political stripes—who are looking for some sort of relief for high prescription drug prices. He said the average American spends \$1,200 a year on prescription drugs, “far more than the rest of the world.”

He told the story of a 77-year-old woman living on a fixed income who for years was able to pay for a specialized inhaler.

“Then, all of a sudden, her insurance company moved it to a Tier 4 drug and her out-of-pocket expenses jumped to \$500 a month.” The same inhaler in Canada costs \$79.

“Why should she have to pay \$6,000 a year to be able to complete the most basic, fundamental biological function of the human body ... breathing in, and breathing out.”

In April, Merkley introduced the End Price Gouging For Medication Act. The bill would require pharmaceutical companies to sell their products in the United States at the same price they sell it to other developed countries. If they don’t, they would face expensive penalties.

Merkley is pushing to include the End Price Gouging For Medication Act to the Build Back Better reconciliation bill.

Merkley said there is no reason that Americans should be paying two-and-a-half times more for prescription drugs or three-and-a-half times more for brand name drugs than the rest

of the world. The pharmaceutical industry has been allowed for too long the ability to “rip off” and “gouge” older and sicker Americans, he said.

Moro, president of the OARA, said the U.S. can make medicines much more affordable for seniors and people with disabilities by allowing Medicare to negotiate lower prices.

“That’s a long overdue improvement that we know will work, because it already works

to lower prices in other areas of government like the Veterans Administration and Medicaid,” she said.

“Negotiating prices would save us all money at the pharmacy, but it would also save Medicare hundreds of billions of dollars that then could be invested in making more improvements ... dental, vision, and hearing coverage for seniors,” she concluded.



Supporters of Medicare expansion rally outside Congressman Kurt Schrader's office September 2019.

From our Local to yours, have a Safe and Happy Labor Day!

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