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Contact: Brendan Daly/Jennifer Crider, 202-225-0100

Pelosi: 'Seniors Have Waited Too Long, Fought Too Hard To Be Sacrificed on Altar of Special Interests'

Washington, D.C. -- House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi spoke early this morning on the House floor in strong opposition to the Republican Medicare prescription drug bill. Below are her remarks:

"Mr. Speaker, I want to thank our Democratic conferees, who have been true champions of a defined, affordable, guaranteed prescription drug benefit under Medicare for seniors: the dean of the House, and Ranking Democrat on the Energy and Commerce Committee, Mr. Dingell; the distinguished Ranking Democrat on the Ways and Means Committee, Mr. Rangel; and a true champion for health care, Mr. Berry, all for their leadership on this issue.

"Sadly, the Republicans would not let these appointed conferees into the conference room, and this bill does not have the benefit of the thinking and experience of our very diverse caucus. That is a great loss to this debate and to our country.

"Mr. Speaker, the Democratic Party has made ensuring the dignity and security of our seniors a cornerstone of our mission for generations. Nearly 40 years ago, a Democratic Congress and Democratic President Lyndon Johnson honored that mission by making Medicare the law of the land.

"Ever since, America's seniors have known where Democrats stand -- we created Medicare and we want to protect and strengthen it.

"America's seniors have also known where Republicans stand -- for 40 years, they have waged war on Medicare. When Congress passed Medicare in 1965, only 13 Republicans in Congress supported it. When Newt Gingrich and Republicans tried to gut Medicare in 1995, President Clinton stopped them. That same year, Newt Gingrich made his intentions about Medicare clear. He said, 'Now we didn't get rid of it in round one because we don't think that's politically smart . . . But we believe it's going to wither on the vine.'

"And tonight the Republicans want to deliver the final blow. On behalf of America's seniors and disabled, we must stop them.

"Recognizing the desperate need of America's seniors, Democrats proposed a guaranteed, defined, affordable prescription drug benefit under Medicare. Instead of

seizing this historic opportunity, Republicans have offered up a Trojan Horse - a deceptive gift intended to win their 40-year war against Medicare.

"Republicans say that this is a first step toward a real prescription drug benefit. The Republican proposal is not a first step. It is a false step. It is a mistake.

"It puts profits for HMOs and big pharmaceutical companies over seniors, providing a \$12 billion slush fund for HMOs and giving drug companies \$139 billion in windfall profits over eight years. It doesn't lower prices of prescription drugs -- it prohibits the government from negotiating lower drug prices. It privatizes Medicare and pushes seniors into HMOs. It makes seniors pay more to keep the Medicare they know and trust.

"It does all this for a deceptive plan that makes most seniors pay \$4,000 out of their first \$5,000 in prescription drug costs. How do you explain that to Mom? Nearly half of all Medicare beneficiaries -- up to 20 million seniors and disabled Americans -- will fall into a "coverage gap," meaning they will pay premiums all year without receiving benefits all year. Under the plan, most seniors will be worse off than before, and millions of retirees will lose their existing employer-provided coverage.

"Republican priorities are clear: They place the special interests of HMOs and pharmaceutical companies before the public interests of America's seniors and disabled. This is not the beginning of a real prescription drug benefit under Medicare. On the contrary, this is the beginning of the end of Medicare as we know it.

"The more seniors across America learn about the details of this scheme, the less they like it and the more they want us to keep fighting for a real prescription drug benefit that answers their real needs.

"Mr. Speaker, this is the hour of decision. Tonight there is only one way to improve this bill and to provide the benefit seniors need and deserve, and that is to vote 'no.' I urge my colleagues to vote against this Republican hoax. I urge them to send all of the conferees - - Democrats and Republicans -- to the conference room to produce a bipartisan bill that will be sustainable over time. I urge them to stand with the 40 million seniors and disabled Americans who look to us for help and hope at this defining moment.

"Speaking on the day when he signed Medicare into law, President Johnson said that this nation's commitment to its seniors was part of a noble tradition that 'calls upon us never to be indifferent toward despair, never to turn away from helplessness, never to ignore or to spurn those who suffer untended in a land that is bursting with abundance.'

"Tonight, the hopes of 40 million seniors and disabled Americans rest upon us. They have waited too long, fought too hard, and endured too many broken promises to be sacrificed on the altar of special interests.

"We cannot, we must not, and we will not, abandon them now."

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