

## Guest Column

### Be heard now on medical benefits for U.S. seniors

By Donald Backofen  
for The News-Sentinel

We cannot but help wonder what the 85 million seniors think when they watch TV, read the paper or listen to the news. One must wonder what our representatives and senators, both state and federal, are trying to do to help seniors have healthy and comfortable years ahead. It appears that our legislators are not concerned, because they already have good health plans, much better than Medicare, and retirement plans all set with good futures.

Remember back in 1993, when President Clinton tried hard to start a national health-care program? Why didn't something happen then to correct the system? Because it turned out to be a partisan Congress, and in lieu of trying to agree, representatives let all citizens suffer.

The health-care bills for seniors that have been passed by the House and Senate are a long way from giving seniors the protection they need through Medicare and very little help with prescriptions. Anything that might be passed now will not be in effect until 2006. Many seniors need help now, because the average price increase for prescriptions from January 2002 to January 2003 was 6 percent, or nearly three and a half times the rate of inflation. More and more seniors are being priced out of the drugs they need.

Regarding Medicare, Congress would like to bring means testing into the program. All beneficiaries need to have access to the same level of protection.

Who will benefit from the plans that the president has suggested? Big Business will again gain many benefits. Seniors will still be means tested for their benefits as well as paying higher premiums. Paying a little higher premium would be expected for Medicare benefits and better help with prescriptions. But that is not the case.

Seniors cannot look for help from the state. Gov. O'Bannon took \$12 million from the tobacco money that was reserved for prescription drugs and put that money into one of his own programs. Reason: The state is very low on funds.

Unless representatives in Washington hear from us, they will do as they please, and the partisan Congress will not get anything accomplished or will pass bills that will not help all seniors. Every senior must call, write or e-mail the offices of our senators and representatives. Tell them that Medicare and prescription drugs should not be means-tested; they should pass a Medicare bill that includes adequate and affordable prescription drug benefits; and that any bill passed must take effect now, not in 2006. Local phone numbers are: Sen. Richard Lugar, 422-1505; Sen. Evan Bayh, 426-3151; and Rep. Mark Souder, 424-3041.

If you do not call to express your thoughts, then do not complain if unsatisfactory bills are passed.

Donald Backofen is a resident of Fort Wayne.