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New Jersey

Corzine calls new drug benefit a 'big mistake' for Jerseyans

Wednesday, December 10, 2003

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U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine said yesterday the new \$395 billion Medicare prescription drug plan that President Bush signed into law this week is a "big, big mistake" and will hurt more New Jerseyans than it helps.

The Democrat, back in New Jersey for the holiday break, is working to stir up public sentiment against the Republican-built plan, which includes a voluntary prescription drug benefit for senior citizens and disabled Americans that takes effect in 2006.

In a one-hour interview with The Star-Ledger's editorial board, Corzine said that although the program will benefit 300,000 residents, it might weaken coverage for more than 500,000 New Jerseyans.

He said he would introduce legislation early next year to solve what he considers the plan's most significant shortcomings.

But with Republicans controlling Congress, he said he doubts that the Democrats' effort to change the new law will amount to more than "hootin' and hollerin'" as the 2004 election campaign gets into full swing.

"I can't imagine that there will be a groundswell to change particular elements of the bill," he said.

Corzine estimated that 94,000 New Jerseyans who are covered by their employers could end up losing prescription drug benefits and be worse off under the new Medicare program.

Another 152,000 low-income seniors who now have their prescription drugs fully covered by Medicaid would be forced to switch to the less generous, more restrictive Medicare plan, Corzine said.

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And he said 220,000 elderly and disabled people now covered by New Jersey's prescription drug plans -- Pharmaceutical Assistance to the Aged and Disabled and Senior Gold -- could face disruption of their coverage, and perhaps weaker benefits, because they will have to enroll in the new Medicare plan.

"This Medicare thing is a big, big mistake for the country, and seniors will realize that in due course," Corzine said.

Corzine's legislation will include provisions allowing New Jerseyans to stay in PAAD and Senior Gold, encourage employers not to drop drug coverage, and allow low-income seniors to stay in the Medicaid drug plan. Those proposals all fell by the wayside during this fall's debate.

U.S. Rep. Mike Ferguson (R-7th Dist.) said Corzine is wrong, that the law is very generous to New Jersey. According to figures his office compiled, the state would receive almost \$400 million a year in new funding.

Ferguson said the new program would pay \$280 million of the \$400 million New Jersey now spends on its two prescription drug plans annually, and that Democratic Gov. James E. McGreevey could use the savings to expand and improve the program.

"The fact is that this law is a huge victory for New Jersey," he said in an interview, "and any Democrat who tried to say otherwise is playing politics with our seniors."

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