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Local News

Corzine promises Medicare plan 'fix'

Tuesday, April 20, 2004

By **Brian Arrington**
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DEPTFORD TWP. -- Speaking to county seniors Monday, U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine unveiled legislation that he says will fix "serious flaws" in the Medicare Prescription Drug Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003.

The recently-signed legislation will not go into effect until 2006. Backers say the act is designed to give seniors and people living with disabilities improved Medicare benefits as well as prescription drug benefits. Corzine said the legislation is "half-baked" and will hurt more than 500,000 of the state's senior citizens.

"It is absolutely essential that we strengthen this bill," said Corzine (D-NJ). "This is a bill that needs to be revised."

Corzine's proposal, which he will introduce to the U.S. Senate this week, is called Preserving Access to Affordable Drugs -- or PAAD -- and will allow the state to administer the new Medicare prescription drug benefit through the current state program -- also called PAAD (Pharmaceutical Assistance Program for the Aged and Disabled). The legislation will also protect Senior Gold program members as well, he said.

Corzine said the federal government would pay the state to provide drug benefits to seniors currently in PAAD and Senior Gold without disruption of coverage, third parties, or limits on the types of drugs eligible for coverage.

The bill would also:

n remove the "disincentives" for employers to drop coverage of their retired employees by allowing their spending on drug costs to count towards an out-of-pocket threshold of \$3,600 included in the new law;

n allow the state to "wrap around" the Medicare benefit through the Medicaid program and restore the ability of Medicare beneficiaries to buy supplemental drug coverage through a Medigap program.

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"I am glad he came down and spoke to us," said Peg Mendoza, president of the Gloucester County Senior Citizen Organization, which represents 38 area senior clubs.

Mendoza was critical of the new federal legislation, but she praised the state plan.

"I wanted to scrap the whole (Medicare Prescription Drug Improvement and Modernization Act)," she said.

"If I had my way, I would not let them touch (the state) PAAD."

New Jersey's PAAD allows income-eligible seniors to pay a \$5 co-pay for drugs, while Senior Gold offers a discount with a \$15 co-pay.

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