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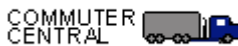
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Top Stories

Congressman, seniors share Medicare card concerns

By: Scott Whipple , Special to the Gazette

08/21/2004

Gladys Kitchens, 81, said her question might just run her out of town, but she hoped U.S. Rep. John Larson (D-1) could answer it.



US Congressman John B. Larson (D-1st) addresses seniors in Rocky Hill.

"I want to know how many people have died in Canada," Kitchens asked at a meeting with the East Hartford congressman in Rocky Hill. The meeting was the second Larson hosted this week to air concerns both he and many local seniors have about the government's new prescription drug plan.

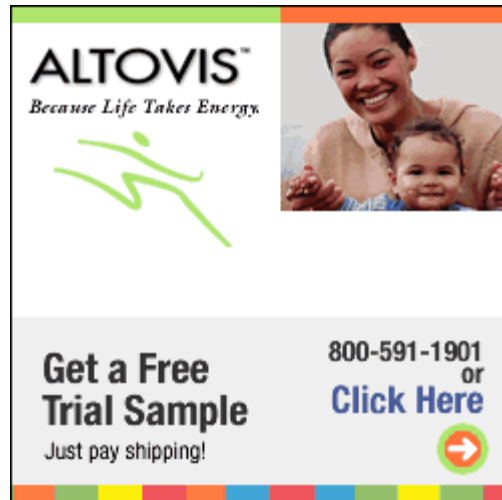
Kitchens referred warnings issued in a recent public relations campaign by pharmaceutical companies and the FDA about the risks of importing Canadian drugs.

Larson told her more people get food poisoning in this country where there is already ongoing FDA(Federal Drug Administration)inspection than from non-federally inspected imported drugs.

"There is not one incident in more than a million plus transactions," Larson assured her. "There is a potential for counterfeiting drugs, but that's done primarily in the U.S., and it's the job of the FDA to make sure it doesn't happen."

The congressman was at the Rocky Hill senior center Wednesday to lead a discussion on the Medicare reform/prescription drug law and Medicare drug discount cards. Monday a similar meeting at the

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East Hartford South End Senior Center drew 400, a crowd which included the congressman's ailing mother, Lois "Pauline" Nolen Larson.

He said he had conducted three studies in his district as they relate to prescription drugs: their importation, how industrialized nations in the Western World treat their citizens with respect to prescription drugs and the new drug discount cards.

Larson said he took on the studies because of his "strong reservations" about the Medicare reform/prescription legislation passed last year. He voiced concern over

the "cumbersome" choice between 33 discount cards.

"You could have gone to Reader's Digest or drugstore.com and gotten about the same benefits without the massive amount of money the government has been spending to advertise the cards," he said. "When you purchase the card you're locked in for a year, but the pharmaceutical company can change the price on a weekly basis and change the formulary."

Larson introduced seniors to Judith Stein, executive director and founder of the non-profit, non-partisan, Storrs-based Center for Medicare Advocacy. Stein took questions from the group and offered the center's help in resolving drug discount card problems.

When Stein asked the group of 40 seniors how many had Internet access, five raised their hands. Only two said they had visited the Medicare website; no one in the room had signed up for the discount card program.

Sal Malinguaggio, 71, of Rocky Hill was one of them. "The AARP(American Association of Retired Persons) fell flat on its face on this issue," he said. The association endorsed the Medicare Act of 2003.

"Our study on importation found that if we had the reimportation bill in effect, you'd be saving 58 percent more on your prescriptions," Larson told the group. He drew sustained applause when he proposed that if the Secretary, Health and Human Services(Tommy Thompson) negotiated directly with pharmaceutical firms the elderly would save even more money. The Congressman has submitted a bill (H.R.3299) which would force manufacturers to offer "deep discounts" on prescription drugs to seniors.


"People feel like refugees from their own healthcare system because they have to go to Canada to get prescription drugs they should get in their own country," he said. "You're paying twice as much as citizens in the industrialized world for drugs; you're subsidizing them."

Larson reminded seniors that the Medicare Act doesn't take effect until 2006, two years after the Presidential election. "This means we have to wait until 2008 to take any action," he said. "I'm outraged by that." Larson charged the interests of pharmaceutical companies have been placed above the interests of the people. "We need to change that," said the congressman.

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