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Bush pitches Medicare plan to seniors of all languages

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By Richard Benedetto, USA TODAY

ANNANDALE, Va. — With little more than a month left before the May 15 signup deadline for Medicare's prescription-drug program, President Bush on Wednesday again urged seniors to enroll, insisting the program is worthwhile.

"It's a good deal," he said, asserting that those who have already signed up have on the average seen their drug bills cut in half.

Bush made his pitch to an audience of about 700 Asian-American seniors at Northern Virginia Community College in suburban Washington. Many listened on headsets that offered translations in Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese and the Cantonese dialect of Chinese.

Bush said he chose the audience to emphasize that many seniors do not speak English and need help navigating the system. He urged community groups and sons and daughters to pitch in.

"I'm trying to show that our government reaches out to people in all walks of life and in all neighborhoods," he said.

He said that if seniors don't want to enroll they don't have to, but he said they should at least take a look at the program and its options.

It was the second day in row Bush urged seniors to enroll. On Tuesday, Bush carried a similar message to seniors in Jefferson City, Mo., and Des Moines.

He said that 29 million of the 42 million eligible seniors are already enrolled, while 6 million are still working and don't need the plan. That leaves 7 million unsigned seniors that Bush is trying to reach.

The plan got bad publicity even before it was launched Jan. 1. There were complaints that the regulations and the options were too complicated for many seniors to understand. For example, Virginia's seniors can choose from more than 40 different drug plans.

"It was so confusing," said Jean Marumoto, 68, of McLean, Va., a retired teacher who was in the audience Wednesday.

However, Marumoto said she settled on Humana and is now saving \$125 a month in drug costs. "It is very good," she said.

Congressional Democrats, most of whom voted against the plan when it passed in 2003, have criticized Bush for crafting a benefit that doesn't work for many seniors.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., said Wednesday that Bush is trying to put a smiling face on a sad picture.

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"Twenty-five percent of those who have enrolled have realized no savings," she said, citing an ABC News-*Washington Post* poll released Wednesday. "If 25% of the cars made by GM and Ford didn't start, they would go out of business."

Schakowsky called on Bush to extend the May 15 deadline to allow more seniors to sign up without paying a penalty in the form of higher premiums.

Bush's personal appearances are part of an effort by the administration to get seniors educated and enrolled in the program. Hundreds of seminars are being held across the country each week, while toll-free phone and Internet help is available 24 hours a day.

Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, an Asian-American who was born in Taiwan, appeared with Bush on Wednesday and said non-English speakers can call government help lines and get instructions in their native language.

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