

Trump broke his promise to lower prescription costs for nation's seniors

By Willie A. Dawson

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When he was a candidate on the campaign trail, Donald Trump promised to lower the price of prescription medications and take on big pharmaceutical companies so that America's seniors could rest easy. As president, he's doing just the opposite - installing a former pharmaceutical industry executive as head of the Department of Health and Human Services, signing a tax bill that included massive tax giveaways to pharmaceutical companies, and slashing programs that help millions of seniors afford the medications we need.

Seniors like me can't afford his empty promises.

In the years since I retired and moved to North Carolina to be closer to my kids, it's been a constant struggle to afford the medications my doctors prescribe. Social Security benefits wouldn't cover the costs of the prescriptions I needed to manage chronic health conditions like COPD, thyroid problems, and high blood pressure, but my income was too high to qualify for additional help.

As a result, I went for

almost three years without my medications. And I know I'm not the only one who risked my health because costs were too high. Without needed medications, chronic conditions get worse and the risk of hospitalization goes up.

I'm covered by Medicare now and can afford some of my medications. I try to keep the cost down so that I can still afford rent, groceries, and transportation. That often means that I stretch out the time between my refills by taking my medications every other day instead of every day as prescribed. Other times, it means a hard choice between the equipment I need to make sure I keep breathing at night and medications that I might be able to go without. Most months, I'm left with just \$5 or 10 in my bank account.

Many seniors here in North Carolina and across the country are being forced to choose between meeting their basic needs and paying for their prescriptions. We're priced out of the care our doctors recommend, whether it's medication, physical therapy, or a nutritious diet. Those of us who need a lot of prescriptions to

manage chronic conditions are at particularly high risk because we often fall into the Medicare donut hole - the gap between the coverage limit for prescriptions and catastrophic coverage.

Once you're in the donut hole, you have to pay 35-44 percent out of pocket for prescriptions. Many of us simply can't afford to cover those costs. In fact, part of the reason I don't buy all of my prescriptions is because I know it could push me over the limit and into the donut hole. I know the donut hole is closing in about a year - but that can't come soon enough.

Trump's proposed budget would only push seniors closer to the edge. While those who qualify for "catastrophic" coverage would see savings, millions of seniors like me and those with prescription drug expenses in the range of \$3,750 to \$8,418 per year would see prices skyrocket. While costs for some prescriptions for seniors might go down under his plan, choices for covered medications would also go down - leaving seniors and their doctors with fewer options.

I wanted to believe President Trump when he

promised to lower drug prices. But his budget sends a different message. So do the big tax giveaways for pharmaceutical companies in the tax bill he signed into law and his choice of a former pharmaceutical company executive to lead HHS. In fact, under Trump's plan, seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income families will pay the price for his tax cuts for the wealthy and big corporations with cuts to critical health care programs like Medicaid and Medicare.

Trump's message is that America's seniors aren't as important as scoring political points and making profits for big pharmaceutical companies. The message is that we don't matter at all.

Seniors are fighting back - demanding answers from the president and from Congress. We're looking for real policies to make prescription drugs affordable, like allowing Medicare to negotiate with the drug companies for lower prices. And if our elected leaders come up short, they'll hear from us again at the ballot box.

Willie A. Dawson lives in Charlotte.