

Statement by Sen. Bernard Sanders on the Prescription Drug Affordability Act of 2015
September 10, 2015 at 10:00am

Thank you all for coming. And let me say a special thanks to Congressman Elijah Cummings.

No one in Congress has done more to lower the outrageously high price of prescription drugs than Congressman Cummings and I thank him for his leadership not only on this issue, but so many others in the House.

We are here today to talk about a huge issue of consequence to the American people. And, that is the fact that the American people pay, by far, the highest prices for prescription drugs in the entire world.

When we talk about healthcare, we are talking about the need of the American people to be able to afford the medicine their doctors prescribe. A life-saving drug does no good if the American people cannot afford that drug.

Yet, last year, nearly one out of every five Americans between the ages of 19 and 64 – 35 million people -- did not get their prescriptions filled because they did not have enough money.

In other words, people all over this country walk into a doctor's office because they are sick. They pay for that visit. The doctor spends time with them. The doctor diagnoses the illness. The doctor writes out a prescription, and nearly one out of every five people are unable to afford to fill that prescription. What happens to those people? Many of them will get sicker and sicker. Others will die. That is an unacceptable situation that we have got to address.

All over this country, hundreds of Americans have contacted my office to share their stories about how they are coping with high drug prices. Let me share three of them today.

Miku from Swarthmore, Pennsylvania wrote

“Advair [The asthma medication I need] with my insurance was a couple hundred dollars -- and when I didn't have insurance it was over \$300. I am a part-time teacher that didn't get insurance through work and doesn't get paid during the summer. Before I could afford to start up insurance again I had a major asthma attack and **I honestly thought I was going to die on the sidewalk.**”

Kayleigh from Salem, Virginia wrote:

“My family makes less than \$27,000 and while my children qualify for Medicaid, my husband and I do not. I have been looking for work for months and have found nothing. Our almost \$100,000 in student debt is looming in the background as well! [Two of my medications] together total close to \$130! **When it comes to taking my pills or feeding my kids there's only one choice!**”

Holly Anne from the state of Washington wrote:

“I have a genetic condition called cystic fibrosis. In the past four years I have been hospitalized twenty times for very painful and damaging complications related to my pancreas ... I have to take many medications just to avoid being in the ER once a week. One of my medications is around a thousand dollars for a month's supply which my parents cannot afford. Because of the

cost I don't take as much as I need to take and my health is suffering because of it Please help everyone else who is dying because they can't afford health care. I don't want to die at eighteen.”

In the richest country in the history of the world, Americans should not have to live in fear that they will die because they cannot afford to take the life-saving medication they need.

The American people should not have to go without the medication they need because Congress does not have the courage to stand up to the prescription drug industry.

The time has come to say very loudly and very clearly that enough is enough. The greed of the pharmaceutical industry is killing Americans. It has got to stop.

It is unacceptable that the top three pharmaceutical companies made a combined \$45 billion in profits last year and spent more on sales and marketing than they did on research and development.

It is unacceptable that total spending on medicine in the United States has gone up by more than 90 percent since 2002.

It is unacceptable that the monthly cost of cancer drugs has more than doubled over the last ten years to \$9,900. In the United States of America, you should not be forced into bankruptcy for being diagnosed with cancer.

Instead of listening to the demands of the pharmaceutical industry and their 1,400 lobbyists – an industry which spent over \$250 million last year on campaign contributions and lobbying expenses -- it is about time that Congress started listening to the 72 percent of the American people who believe that the cost of medication is too expensive.

It is time for the United States to join the rest of the industrialized world by implementing prescription drug policies that work for everybody, not just the CEOs of the pharmaceutical industry.

That's exactly what the legislation that Congressman Cummings and I will be introducing today begins to do.

Specifically:

1. This bill requires Medicare to use its bargaining power to negotiate with the prescription drug companies for better prices – a practice that was banned by law. Not only would this substantially reduce the prices seniors pay for drugs, it could save Medicare over half a trillion dollars over the next decade.
2. This bill would allow individuals, pharmacists, and wholesalers to import prescription drugs from licensed Canadian pharmacies where drug prices are 40 percent lower per person than they are in the U.S.

You're looking at the first Member of Congress who took a busload of seniors to Canada to purchase prescription drugs in 1999.

I will never forget the tears in the eyes of women who were able to buy the breast cancer drug tamoxifen at a tenth of the price that they were paying in the U.S.

I would ask all of my Democratic and Republican friends who tout the benefits of “free trade” to support this concept. If we can import lettuce and tomatoes from Mexico, there is absolutely no reason why we cannot import safe and affordable prescription drugs from Canada.

3. This bill would hold the pharmaceutical industry accountable when they defraud the American people. Today, nearly every major pharmaceutical company has been convicted of either civil or criminal fraud. And even though the Justice Department has won suits requiring them to pay billions in fines, the prescription drug companies simply treat these fines as the cost of doing business. Our bill would say that if a drug company is convicted of fraud, they will lose their market exclusivity on the drugs they sell.
4. This bill would end "pay for delay" – a practice in which brand name prescription drug companies pay other companies not to manufacture cheaper generic drugs. The FTC has estimated that pay for delay is costing consumers and taxpayers about \$3.5 billion a year in higher drug prices. That is unacceptable.
5. This bill would demand more transparency from drug companies, who have been concealing the true cost of their research and development.

I am delighted that this legislation is being endorsed by the Alliance for Retired Americans, Social Security Works, the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, Families USA, the National Center for Health Research, and Public Citizen representing the voices of tens of millions of Americans.

Let me just conclude my remarks by saying this. I know how hard it will be to pass this legislation. I know how hard it will be to defeat the prescription drug industry. In fact, to my knowledge the prescription drug industry has never lost a battle on Capitol Hill.

But at a time when a huge majority of the American people want us to take action, when 74 percent of Republicans and 93 percent of Democrats, want the federal government to negotiate with the drug companies top lower prices, the time has come to say enough is enough. We cannot let the drug companies continue to rip-off Americans who are suffering any longer.