M E M O R A N D U M

To: Reporters and Editors
Re: Part D implementation, Finance Committee meeting
Da: Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2006

Sen. Chuck Grassley, chairman of the Committee on Finance, today made the following comment on how to resolve problems in the implementation of the Medicare prescription drug benefit.

"None of the implementation problems we're seeing today have anything to do with the six-month open enrollment period ending on May 15. Those who opposed the Medicare drug benefit are now taking this opportunity to propose steps that could undermine the program. The implementation problems are mainly logistical and administrative, but they're causing hardship for some of the poorest, sickest beneficiaries. This is a serious situation. It seems CMS is taking it seriously and we all need to make sure we fix it. But delaying enrollment in May won't help deliver prescription drugs to the people who need them now. And delaying enrollment also would likely increase the premiums that beneficiaries have to pay for drug coverage. Prescription drug plans based their proposals to serve Medicare beneficiaries on the enrollment period specified in the law. Changing that schedule would affect those proposals and could lead to higher premiums. Rather than delay help for seniors, we need to fix the problems. Medicare program officials have been and continue to report on their efforts to make the system work as Congress intended. CMS can fix these problems using its authority under the law and can do it faster than if Congress comes in and changes the law. Tomorrow morning, all 20 members of the Finance Committee -- 11 Republicans and 9 Democrats -- will have the chance to hear in person from Secretary Leavitt and CMS Administrator Mark McClellan. I've scheduled this members' meeting so all of us can direct our questions and concerns to those in charge of the Medicare rollout and get answers. It's important for Congress to work with the Medicare program officials to fix any problems, and I hope for high attendance at this meeting."