

Illinoisans flock to Canada

Drug costs are key focus of Hull Senate campaign

By Jennifer Wig
QUAD-CITY TIMES
Springfield Bureau

They stare out the luxury coach windows with a collective gleam in their eyes, fidgeting with the same excitement children reserve for vacations.

For some, it is a vacation of sorts. For others, it's a money-saving trip to the Promised Land of prescription drugs — Canada — where medications go for up to 50 percent less than

the bill at a U.S. pharmacy.

The Illinois riders, mostly retirees, are guests of Blair Hull. The Chicago multi-millionaire wants Democrats to pick him as their U.S. Senate candidate March 16, and so far he's pumped more than \$20 million of his own fortune into the race.

Hull has made affordable prescription drugs and improved health care the cornerstone of his campaign. This is the fourth caravan he's shepherded, and four buses are in this convoy's run for the border. The gig has cost him close to \$50,000.

Over the course of the three-day, two-night journey that

ended Wednesday, Hull will pay for their meals and motel rooms in addition to the bus charter. His aides will circulate, handing out bottles of cold water, juice, chips, pretzels and granola bars.

As his monster chariots eat up the highway asphalt, Hull chats with passengers, listening to different versions of the same story: Prescription drugs are too expensive for their fixed incomes. The health-care system needs to change.

Shirley and Louis Phelps, of Centralia, sit together. They've been married for 53 years. She watches out for him, and does most of the talking. Louis lost

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Roosevelt Hall of Rock Island was one Blair Hull in a trip to Canada to fill his

Sharon P...
...to feel like a vaca...

Hull's health plan would cost \$88B

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SPRINGFIELD — U.S. Senate candidate Blair Hull has taken busloads of Illinoisans to Canada for cheaper prescription drugs, but he calls such action a “band-aid” and proposes systemic change to achieve a long-term solution.

According to Hull's Web site,

there are more than 1.5 million Illinoisans who do not have health insurance. In his plan, HealthAmerica, Hull would scale back President Bush's tax cuts, generating the necessary \$88 billion to create a low-cost government alternative. Individuals and families would be able to buy into the plan and premiums would be capped at 7.5 percent of income.

The health plan also would

automatically enroll children in the state's Child Health Insurance Programs and allow young adults to remain on their parents' insurance until age 24. Early retirees would also be allowed to buy into Medicare or the new HealthAmerica plan at a top cost of 7.7 percent of their income.

Hull's plan also includes:

■ Medicare coverage for pre-

scription drugs, direct government involvement in negotiating costs of drugs and imported drugs from Canada.

■ Allowing those with chronic health problems to buy into Medicaid as they wait for Medicare eligibility.

■ Decreasing costs by curbing lawsuits that result in high malpractice insurance for doctors and policing Medicare fraud.

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his right lung to cancer, she says, but veterans' benefits pay for his meds.

Shirley always was the healthy one. She proudly says she had never missed a day of work in her life prior to retirement.

“But when I quit, I went all to pieces,” she confides, leaning across the aisle to talk to Hull and another passenger, Joan Kaplan. “If it weren't for veterans' benefits, it'd be a losing battle.” Shirley spends \$628 a month for her seven life-saving prescriptions.

She was not sure she would vote for Hull prior to the trip, but now she is in his corner. “He proved to me he was more for the people than some of the others,” she said.

Hull has vowed to pass health-care reform legislation if he is elected, or forego a second term. Almost everyone on the bus agrees the candidate has seized on a hot-button issue that will resonate with voters. And despite a drop in Hull's polling numbers in recent weeks because of newly released court files surrounding his last marriage and divorce, the bus riders believe in his mission.

Most said Hull's divorce “is none of our business.”

Hull, 61, a multi-millionaire trader, has been to the altar three times. He divorced his wife of 29 years in 1994 and married real estate broker Brenda Sexton in 1995. He divorced Sexton in 1996, claiming mental cruelty, but the two remarried in 1997.

The following year they divorced again, and charges of spouse abuse have dogged Hull's

campaign in recent days. Even as his public relations scramble to mend his image, Hull said he is focused on mending health care.

“I can relate to people struggling,” he said. “If you see a problem and you have the ability to fix it, then you should do so.”

Roosevelt Hall, of Rock Island, has been retired from construction since 1982. He scrapes by on a Social Security check and welcomes the free trip to Canada, although he is skeptical about the results. “I'm just on this trip to see what's going to happen,” he said. “If I don't get disappointed, it'd be nice.”

Hall spends \$380 each month on prescription drugs, but still must skip a few pills to make ends meet.

“With the cost of everything, you just can't buy all the meds you need. If you ain't got the money, you can't get it. It's just like that,” he said.

Hull is on a different bus today, and the riders are already becoming weary. The eight-hour trip begins to feel less like a vacation and more like a difficult mission. But when the bus pulls into Detroit, people awaken. After traveling through the Windsor Tunnel's mile-long stretch under the Detroit River, excitement is back in the air. They have arrived at the Canadian pharmacy.

Hull's legions return to the waiting room, eager to see how much money they will save.

Naomi Lewis, of East Moline, spends \$400 a month on drugs in Illinois. She lost her insurance four years ago when the Cedar Falls, Iowa, company she worked for went belly up.

“When you take that much out of your Social Security and you live in a house and you've got

bills and everything else, I tell you — you don't know if you'll be able to make it,” she said.

Lewis is disappointed. She leans on her cane after paying for her medication, examining the receipt. The cost for her prescription is about the same. She guesses that it is because the cost of her blood pressure pills fluctuates from one time to the next in Illinois, although she does not know why.

“That's what happens,” she said, frowning. “It's the poor man who gets the brunt.”

She said at least Hull paid for this trip for her and others.

“I think it's just wonderful what he's doing. I hope it'll help. I don't know how on earth he could be so gracious. He has a heart,” she said.

Although the U.S. Food & Drug Administration has released safety warnings about reimporting drugs from Canada, neither Hull nor those on this trip seem to care. The pharmacy employees do not either.

Sharon Packwood, a registered nurse at the pharmacy, said such concerns are irrelevant. Just like any American pharmacy, all prescriptions are issued with a series of orders, the pharmacy's phone number and a packet of instructions.

“They're made by the same makers, so it's just the difference in cost,” she said. “It's great to be able to meet the other people and it's great to help them financially.”

Hull said the FDA “kills people every day” because many Americans who need medication cannot legally buy it via the Internet from Canadian pharmacies under current federal regulations. Those who have received their drugs mill about the phar-

macy, hunting down gifts for grandchildren, buying snacks and examining Canadian prices on everything from shampoo to pencils.

Hall said the drug companies must be making money in Canada, even with the cheaper prices, so he wonders about the companies' American profits.

Lewis is still unconvinced that it could be worth it to order drugs from Canada. “Not by the time you pay your postage,” she said.

Still, as the bus pulls away from the pharmacy to head home, the group erupts in cheers for cheaper drugs. The passengers are animated with their completed mission. They chatter about who saved how much for their drugs, and grumble over the cost of Illinois prescriptions.

But as the bus heads back south, passengers one by one begin to pick up their books and lean their heads against the chairs for naps. By dark, the thrill of the trip has entirely dissipated, replaced with fatigue and a longing for home.

The bus stops in Joliet, Springfield and Belleville to drop off passengers. At each stop, people gather their belongings and say good-bye to the new friends they have made.

Hull, who disembarks in Joliet, said that overall the trip was very nice, and he was not disappointed. “This way you don't have to pay for a shipment,” he said.

And what about the man behind the trip? Hull said he probably will vote for Blair Hull.

“He wants us to vote for him,” Hull said. “He's showing us what he can do.”