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Access to Prescription Drugs for Rural Seniors and Chronic Care Individuals

Increasing access to prescription drugs is an issue in many rural areas. The winter weather conditions make this problem even more pressing for Vermonters. These problems combined with current financial crisis make obtaining prescriptions very difficult for seniors and chronic care individuals in Vermont. Several safe, cost effective ways to bring prescription medications to those individuals and others is through ordering the medication online. One state has set up a websites for their citizens to purchase medication. Several corporations are now allowing for home delivery of many prescriptions.¹ These methods can be more cost efficient because insurance companies, recently, have been more lenient on mail order companies than traditional pharmacies. Most mail order companies are allowed to distribute 90-day supplies of prescriptions and offer low shipping costs.² Safety isn't compromised because the companies still need a doctor's prescription and full medical history before sending you medication. Recently "Telehealth" centers, which provide pharmacy related care utilizing the Internet and video chat, have been able to bring the pharmacists to rural people.³

State Action

The states of Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and Montana, all of whom have rural communities and road conditions similar to Vermont's, found that the main problem facing seniors is not driving to the pharmacy (a study conducted by University of Minnesota researchers found that only 7 percent of elderly residents lived more than 20 miles from a pharmacy), but paying for the medication.⁴ One method that Montanan's used to improve access to the closest pharmacy (which was 30 miles away) was to designate one person to drive to the pharmacy and pick up everyone's prescriptions; to address security, privacy and concerns regarding the effect of ambient temperatures on the medicines, the Montana Board of

¹ Ronald Wirtz, "Special Delivery?" *Fedgazette*, a publication of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minnesota, January 1, 2006, accessed December 28, 2011, http://www.minneapolisfed.org/publications_papers/pub_display.cfm?id=1406.

² Ronald Wirtz, "Special Delivery?"

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Service Administration: Rural Health, "Telehealth." accessed October 18, 2011. <http://www.hrsa.gov/ruralhealth/about/telehealth/>

⁴ Ronald Wirtz, "Special Delivery?"

Pharmacy came up with a temperature-controlled, security-code delivery bag.⁵ Minnesota has created a website that allows residents to purchase prescription medication over the internet (the website address is <http://www.state.mn.us/portal/mn/jsp/home.do?agency=Rx>). Another method is mail order, which allows for quick refills and usually larger orders, e.g., three months of pills instead of only one month.⁶ The increase in the utilization of mail order, however, has a tradeoff—it threatens the already dwindling number of traditional pharmacies. Recently “more health plans move to mandatory mail order,” instead of traditional pharmacies, “for certain kinds of... maintenance drugs that are taken regularly to help people manage chronic conditions like high cholesterol, arthritis or heart disease.”⁷

Mail Order

There are many retailers that will deliver medication like, Wal-Mart, RxAmerica, and other traditional pharmacies. Wal-Mart now offers “a 90-day supply of approximately 300 generic prescriptions for \$10 each via mail delivery” in order to combat rising health care costs and mobility problems.⁸ Wal-Mart’s program also has “no membership and no enrollment fees.”⁹ Vermont is one of 22 states that can already take advantage of this program.¹⁰ In addition to the 300 generic prescriptions, Wal-Mart also “provides delivery for over 3,000 generic and brand-name prescriptions.”¹¹

RxAmerica (soon to be CVS Caremark) is a Pharmacy Benefits Management provider that offers a home delivery service. To place an order with RxAmerica via the mail individuals must submit a completed “Patient Profile form” (medical history, etc.) and the prescription(s); faxed prescriptions “must come directly from the doctor” for safety reasons.¹² After the initial delivery, one can request refills over the phone or via the internet. RxAmerica delivers to all 50 states. Some shipping may apply and certain prescription drugs will have to be signed for upon delivery.¹³ Other companies that home deliver are: Aetna-Rx, Tricare, Express-Scripts, Medco Health, and Cigna-Teldrug. Several traditional pharmacies are also providing home delivery,

⁵ Ronald Wirtz, “Special Delivery?”

⁶ Ronald Wirtz, “Special Delivery?”

⁷ Ronald Wirtz, “Special Delivery?”

⁸ Wal-Mart Corporate, “Wal-Mart Mail Delivery Prescription Program Broadens Access to Affordable Prescriptions in 22 States and Washington D.C.” August 18, 2009. accessed October 17, 2011.

<http://walmartstores.com/pressroom/news/9335.aspx>

⁹ Wal-Mart Corporate, “Wal-Mart Mail Delivery Prescription Program Broadens Access to Affordable Prescriptions in 22 States and Washington D.C..”

¹⁰ Wal-Mart Corporate, “Wal-Mart Mail Delivery Prescription Program Broadens Access to Affordable Prescriptions in 22 States and Washington D.C..”

¹¹ Wal-Mart Corporate, “Wal-Mart Mail Delivery Prescription Program Broadens Access to Affordable Prescriptions in 22 States and Washington D.C..”

¹² RxAmerica, “Home Delivery.” October 20, 2008, accessed October 17, 2011.

<http://www.rxamerica.com/news.htm>.

¹³ RxAmerica, “Home Delivery.”

including CVS and Riteaid.¹⁴ Costco is also starting to provide home delivery and 90-day supplies for certain insurance carriers.¹⁵

Telehealth

Several of the companies that home deliver are also beginning to offer telepharmacy options. Telepharmacy, “uses state-of-the-art telecommunications so pharmacists can... review prescriptions, double-check fill accuracy and consult with patients about their drug interactions and other health matters.”¹⁶ North Dakota has utilized this method and is home to 33 of the about 200 telepharmacy locations in the United States. North Dakota estimates that “40,000 rural citizens have had their pharmacy services restored, retained, or established through telepharmacy.”¹⁷ The Office for the Advancement of Telehealth (OAT) “promotes the use of telehealth technologies for health care delivery, education, and health information services... to assure quality health care for underserved, vulnerable, and special needs populations.”¹⁸ OAT is a part of the “Office of Rural Health Policy, located within the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.”¹⁹ OAT provides several grants programs to help fund projects for increasing telehealth opportunities.

Conclusion

There are a number of approaches to insure that elderly citizens are capable of gaining access to their prescription drugs, including setting up a state website for ordering prescriptions, mail order prescriptions, and “telepharmacy.”

This report was completed on December 28, 2011 by Shelby Deaton and Ariel Henley under the supervision of graduate student Kate Fournier and Professor Anthony Gierzynski in response to a request from Representative Sarah Buxton.

Contact: Professor Anthony Gierzynski, 513 Old Mill, The University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405, phone 802-656-7973, email agierzyn@uvm.edu.

Disclaimer: This report has been compiled by undergraduate students at the University of Vermont under the supervision of Professor Anthony Gierzynski. The material contained in the report does not reflect the official policy of the University of Vermont.

¹⁴ CVS Pharmacy, “Ordering Prescriptions for Home Delivery.” 2011.

http://www.cvs.com/CVSApp/help/help_subtopic_details.jsp?sessionId=6177C560B19CBABA0521023168D63717.commerce.209?subtopicName=Ordering+prescriptions+for+home+delivery&topicid=400011

¹⁵ Costco Pharmacy, “Mail Order/Online Pharmacy Service,” 2011, accessed October 17, 2011.

<http://www.costco.com/Service/FeaturePage.aspx?ProductNo=11622895>.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Service Administration: Rural Health, “Telehealth.”

¹⁷ Ronald Wirtz, “Special Delivery?”

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Service Administration: Rural Health, “Telehealth.”

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Service Administration: Rural Health, “Telehealth.”