New program offers free drugs for uninsured

By Judith Graham
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Thousands of uninsured, low-income Chicago families will start getting access to free prescription drugs this week with the launch of a new program.

The program, MedAccess Chicago, is the first in the city to secure bulk medications from drug companies and distribute them at no cost through community health clinics.

It promises to become a much-needed alternative, at least for some families, to the beleaguered Cook County health system, where patients often wait in line for hours to fill prescriptions.

In the first year, four companies will donate up to $7 million in medications for conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure. They are Abbott Laboratories, AstraZeneca PLC, Merck & Co. and Novartis Pharmaceutical Corp.

The program is starting at two of the city's largest clinics for low-income patients, Community Health and Erie Family Health Center. Together, the clinics serve more than 35,000 patients a year, more than half of whom are uninsured.

Often, these individuals have medical conditions such as heart disease or diabetes that can be controlled only if they take medications daily. Yet few have the resources to buy drugs and, similarly, clinics don't have the money to foot the bill.

The result is that many patients end up going without needed treatments, becoming sicker and developing more serious conditions.

Pharmacist Tony Berndtme discloses an allergy medication with a patient at a MedAccess Chicago pharmacy in Community Health on the West Side.
DRUGS:
Group hopes to fill 100,000 prescriptions

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complications.

“Our goal is to remove barriers that keep our uninsured patients from filling prescriptions and create opportunities for better control of chronic conditions,” said Dr. Lee Francis, chief executive officer of Erie Family Health.

A major barrier is the ongoing financial crisis at Cook County’s health system, the largest source of low-cost drugs for poor people in the city. Earlier this year, the county started charging $3 per prescription, more than many poor, uninsured patients say they can afford.

What’s more, only patients registered at county facilities can buy low-cost drugs through the county’s prescription program, a requirement that excludes most families who seek care at independent health clinics. For instance, only 600 of Community Health’s 6,000 patients are able to get prescriptions through Cook County.

MedAccess Chicago steps into the breach with a plan to solicit donations from drug companies and distribute the medications without charge at community clinics. “Our model is the Great Chicago Food Depository, which asks restaurants to donate unused products to needy populations,” said Judith Haasis, executive director of Community Health.

Although the program is starting off small, officials hope it will fill as many as 100,000 prescriptions a year by 2012, she said.

“We realize that many people are uninsured and have trouble affording their medicines. We are committed to helping these patients gain access to the medications they need,” Kevin Rigby, vice president of public affairs with Novartis, said in a written statement.

To qualify, people must be patients of participating clinics, uninsured and meet drug companies’ financial criteria. Generally, families with incomes up to double the poverty level—about $40,000 for a family of four—will be eligible.

A new central pharmacy at Community Health will dispense the medications directly or send them by van to Erie Family Health. Eventually, the goal is to have MedAccess “telepharmacies” scattered at clinics across the city. These vending machine-like units would be stocked with commonly used drugs to be released electronically when a prescription is filled, Haasis said.

The new program won’t fill every need, Francis said. Some patients will continue to get low-cost generic drugs at Target or Wal-Mart. Some will apply for aid directly through drug companies and qualify for their patient assistance programs. Others will pay cash for items, such as insulin, that haven’t yet been donated. And still others may choose to go to Cook County if that option remains available, he predicted.

Consumers may wonder how the new MedAccess Chicago program differs from other pharmaceutical initiatives. To begin with, it’s targeted at the uninsured, a group that by definition isn’t enrolled in Medicaid or Medicare, government programs that have strong pharmacy benefits.

Unlike the state program Illinois Cares Rx, MedAccess isn’t limited to people who are disabled or at least 65 years old; younger families will qualify. In contrast to Cook County’s drug program, it doesn’t charge a fee and it opens up new avenues for patients to get free drugs at community clinics.

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