

State prescription drug plan expanding

Doyle hopes to cut costs for those without health care

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Madison - Starting today, Wisconsin residents who lack access to affordable prescription drugs can enroll in a state purchasing pool to buy medications at lower prices. The state's BadgerRx Gold Card should help lower prescription costs for those who don't have any health insurance, those who don't have a prescription drug benefit plan that covers their necessary medications or those who face high co-payments.

The program is available to individuals for a \$25 annual enrollment fee, and to families of four or more for a \$75 annual enrollment fee, Gov. Jim Doyle is set to announce today in La Crosse and Appleton.

Individuals who enroll online will pay \$20, and families will pay \$70. There is no age requirement and no screening for pre-existing medical conditions.

One in six Wisconsin residents doesn't have prescription drug coverage, and those who enroll could benefit from significant discounts negotiated by Navitus Health Solutions, a Madison company that administers the program.

More than 700 of the state's 880 pharmacies are expected to accept the card.

Doyle said participants could save 25% to 40% on drugs, depending on the price negotiated with the drug manufacturer.

Doyle said Wisconsin's program is the first of its kind in the nation. Residents "will be able to benefit from the bargaining power the state has when it is purchasing through Navitus for state employees and retirees," he said. "In many cases, they will be able to take it to their local pharmacy, so the convenience of this is pretty dramatic."

Doyle sketched out plans to expand the program during his "state of the state" speech in January. BadgerRx was created in the last two-year budget as a prescription drug benefit plan for 235,000 state employees and retirees; an additional 230,000 people have joined as private companies have adopted the plan, said Tom Korpady, administrator of the division of insurance services for the Department of Employee Trust Funds.

The program saved taxpayers \$25 million on prescription drug purchases for state employees and retirees in 2004, and participants saved about 25% on the most-used drugs.

Doyle said the expansion of the program won't cost the state any money.

State Rep. Dean Kaufert (R-Neenah), co-chairman of the Legislature's budget-writing Joint Finance Committee, said he hasn't heard any major objections to the program.

Doyle said the scale of the program is what makes it work, because of the bargaining power brought on by negotiating purchases for state employees and retirees.

"We can now pass on the savings that come from that to private employers, and then to individual people as well," Doyle said.

Helping Wisconsin residents access cheaper prescription drugs has been a priority for Doyle, although earlier efforts have met with limited success.

Online purchases slow

A much-touted effort to allow Wisconsin residents to order prescription drugs online through a handful of Canadian pharmacies has had limited success.

Between February 2004 and March 2005, state residents had 4,839 prescriptions filled through the Web site, according to the state Department of Health and Family Services.

That program is in jeopardy because the Canadian government has threatened to cut off shipments of drugs to U.S. residents.

Doyle said many people purchase drugs from Canada through other Internet sites and storefront pharmacies, so it's hard to tell how many people are using that option.

Still, he said, he expects BadgerRx to appeal to more people, because they may fill prescriptions at their local pharmacies.

"People who are reluctant to deal over the Internet, or are concerned about the Canadian prescription drug issue, this is an option for them to go to their local pharmacy . . . and purchase a drug that in most cases will provide them with really dramatic savings," Doyle said.

By consolidating drug purchases, the state has greater ability to bargain with drug companies for lower prices through BadgerRx. A group of doctors and pharmacists evaluates drugs by their effectiveness and price and then decides which will be covered by the program.

According to a brochure provided by Doyle's office, someone who purchases Desogen and Citalopram for an anxiety disorder now pays about \$92.50 a month for medications. Those costs would drop to about \$33.50 a month through BadgerRx.

For someone treating high cholesterol with Lovastatin and Niaspan, current costs are now about \$112.40 a month. With BadgerRx, those costs would fall to about \$90.80 a month.

For more information, call (866) 809-9382.