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Pharmacy Discounts Proposed In County

Montgomery Aims
To Assist Uninsured

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Montgomery County plans to offer a prescription drug discount card to uninsured residents, giving them a chance to save 15 to 30 percent off the full price of medicines made in the United States, according to legislation introduced by council members yesterday.

With the County Council likely to soon make less-expensive, Canadian drugs available to current and former county employees as part of their health plan, there is support among members to provide the county's roughly 80,000 uninsured residents some relief from high drug prices.

"It's exciting, it's innovative," said council member Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring), who announced the initiative yesterday with council member Marilyn Praisner (D-Eastern County).

"Everyone shares the concern about the high cost of prescription drugs and [is] trying to find ways to respond to that challenge," Praisner said. Other co-sponsors of the legislation are council members George L. Leventhal (D-At Large), Howard A. Denis (R-Potomac-Bethesda) and Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg). Together they form a majority of the council.

If approved, the proposal would add Montgomery County to a growing list of localities taking the prescription drug issue into their hands. Nassau County, N.Y., devised a similar plan last month. Counties in Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey have also recently announced discount programs. The

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National Association of Counties plans to conduct a pilot program in about 30 counties throughout the country.

In April, Maryland Attorney General J. Joseph Curran Jr. (D) unveiled a Web site—one of the first of its kind in the country—on which uninsured patients can enter a Zip code and prescription type and compare the prices at pharmacies in their neighborhoods and across the state.

Also in the spring, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) announced that Maryland would join a pool of states to save money by buying drugs in bulk.

Perez said these jurisdictions are filling a gap that should be addressed at the federal level. "The federal government ought to be driving the prescription drug train, but that train derailed on Capitol Hill," he said.

Perez added that the cards will cost the Montgomery County government and individual residents nothing. "We're an important purchaser of health care, and with purchasing power comes leverage, and that's what we're trying to do," Perez said.

Council members hope to have the cards ready in January.

The county hasn't decided which discount company to use. One possibility is Caremark, a pharmacy benefits manager that the National Association of Counties is using for the pilot study and that already has a relationship with Montgomery County.

One potential drawback is that Caremark's participating pharmacies, which will offer cardholders a 15 percent discount on name-brand drugs and a 30 percent discount on generics, include the Safeway, Giant Food and Rite Aid chains, but not the ubiquitous CVS.

Perez said pharmacy prices for a drug such as Lipitor, which helps fight cholesterol, are as situational as the price of a seat on an airline. Some customers pay "full freight," others pay "super saver," still others are in between, while a few others are flying free with frequent flier tickets.

The idea behind the cards, he said, is to help the uninsured—the ones paying "full freight"—get access to the cheaper fares for the same seats.