

## A Threat to Members' Healthcare and Privacy: Mandatory Mail Order Prescription Drug Programs

### The Problem

Many employers are trying to implement a cost-saving program that could have dire consequences for people who are on long-term prescription drug treatment programs, including those with HIV/AIDS. The program seeks to reclassify a number of prescription drugs as "specialty items" that are required to be filled by mail order rather than at a local pharmacy. While this may seem innocuous on its face, there are a number of serious consequences that could result from such a change, including exposure of confidential information, drug interactions, loss of flexibility in prescription refills, and more.

Pride at Work strongly urges all benefits administrators and contract negotiation teams to reject these changes outright. To be clear, we do not oppose voluntary mail order prescription drug programs. But limiting the ways in which individuals can receive life-sustaining medicine is unacceptable.

A 2013 survey by the National Community Pharmacists Association found significant concerns from respondents about a number of the known issues with these programs. Additionally, more than 80% of those surveyed said they would oppose a mandatory mail-order prescription requirement. ([http://www.ncpanet.org/pdf/mail\\_order\\_pharmacy\\_survey.pdf](http://www.ncpanet.org/pdf/mail_order_pharmacy_survey.pdf))



### The Impact

Mail order prescription drug programs are vulnerable to problems.

- For people with chronic conditions, including those living with HIV/AIDS, it is imperative to maintain the prescribed treatment regimen without interruption. Mail order prescriptions limit a person's flexibility in refilling prescriptions. This can become an issue during extended travel or even something as simple as loss or accidental contamination of the medication. Immediate access to life-sustaining medications is vital in these cases.
- For many long-term conditions, particularly HIV, there remains significant societal stigma. Prescription refills are often mis-delivered, stolen, or opened in transit, which significantly increases the likelihood your confidential medical information will be disclosed.
- Confidentiality is particularly important for LGBTQ people. The LGBTQ community still faces discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations, credit, education, and more. In more than half of all states, you can still be fired or denied a job on the basis of your sexual orientation or gender identity. Breaches of confidentiality, particularly with regard to HIV/AIDS prescriptions, can threaten the employment, housing, or even physical security of an individual.
- It is difficult for some individuals to maintain a medicine regimen with any regularity. Additional barriers will make them less likely to take their medications, leading to relapse or further health complications.

- Individuals with HIV/AIDS are significantly less likely to transmit the infection to others when they take their medications regularly and those who do not have the infection can take the same medications to prevent infection. The same concerns about stigma and privacy could lead an individual to forgo preventative treatment, thereby putting their health – and the health of others – at greater risk.
- Many people on long-term treatment programs have valuable relationships with their pharmacies/pharmacists. By filling all prescriptions at a single pharmacy, trust can be built over time and pharmacists can provide an extra line of defense against potentially dangerous drug mixing.
- In-pharmacy services like flu shots, basic medical advice and consultation, and diabetic management assistance, can lower medical care costs dramatically. These programs are less likely to be used by individuals if they aren't regularly visiting their local pharmacy.
- For a number of expensive medications, pharmaceutical companies offer financial assistance to offset prescription co-pays. But it is often the pharmacist who shares information about these programs. Requiring mail orders could shift even more cost to the individual.
- Many local pharmacies also offer supplemental and ancillary programs, such as dietary and advocacy assistance. This would be unavailable once an individual's prescription was moved to mail order only.
- For those who rely on a post office box, packages generally cannot be delivered, which leaves prescriptions vulnerable or requires alternative arrangements.
- Mailboxes for rural customers are often left exposed to the elements, increasing the chances of contamination. With limited refills available, customers who are already running low on pills would face delivery delays and the possibility of running out of safe medication.
- Pharmacy workers could see their hours reduced or their positions eliminated as more prescriptions are moved to mail order only. This would reduce jobs, hurt the local economy, and put families and communities at risk.
- It would be harder for small, independent pharmacies to compete with large corporate conglomerates that already have mail order programs. This, in turn, could lead to further consolidation and less competition in the industry.

## Conclusion

Our benefits administrators, contract negotiators, and leadership must push back against these proposals. Union members living with a long-term condition could be harmed by such a change in healthcare benefits, and the potential impact for those living with HIV/AIDS is acute and potentially devastating. There is a better way forward.

In-pharmacy multi-month refills would still lower costs without requiring individuals to expose their personal information to strangers and criminals. Concerns like theft and environmental exposure would be mitigated or eliminated as well.

Mail order programs are fraught with potential complications and concerns that could have a dramatic impact on the health and safety of our members. These programs can – and should – remain an option for those who wish to take advantage of the convenience and savings. But we cannot allow the health or private medical history of our members to be compromised in service of profits for corporations and marginally lower prescription drug costs.

Labor must continue to lead the way for quality, accessible, safe, and effective healthcare for working people.