

Los Angeles Times

L.A. mayor launches prescription discounts for residents

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Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa announced a prescription-drug discount program for city residents. Standing behind him at another event Monday is Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. (Ann Johansson / Los Angeles Times / August 31)

By Maeve Reston

September 1, 2009

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa launched a prescription-drug discount program for city residents Monday, following up on a campaign promise he made five years ago while running for mayor.

At a senior center in Montecito Heights, Villaraigosa said the city had contracted with Ohio-based Envision Pharmaceutical Services, which will negotiate with pharmaceutical companies to obtain lower prices for residents who carry discount cards. The discounts, which could range from 5% to 40% depending on the medicine, will be available at about 1,500 Los Angeles pharmacies that participate in Envision's network.

Villaraigosa said the program, which will be free for participants, was a "small but important opportunity for people to have access to prescription drugs at a lower cost."

"This is the first of its kind, anywhere, and as it gets noticed around the country, I think you're going to see more cities try to do what we are doing here," Villaraigosa said. "We are going to figure out a way to get this in the hands of everybody in this state."

The mayor said the Los Angeles program would be different from those in other states and counties because there are no age, income or residency restrictions.

But the National Assn. of Counties, which partnered with CVS Caremark to offer a prescription drug discount card to all of its members about four years ago, also has no eligibility or paperwork requirements for its program.

At least 1,248 U.S. counties, including Riverside and 21 others in California, offer the association's program to their residents. Andrew Goldschmidt, the association's director of membership and marketing, said there have been preliminary discussions with Los Angeles County officials about also enrolling.

Envision runs discount prescription card programs in Ohio and Florida, as well as programs for private businesses across the country. Company executives say they have a national network of about 62,000 participating pharmacies.

Gerald Kominski, associate director of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, said he viewed the city-sponsored bulk purchasing program as "excellent public policy." He said it was most likely to help some of the 2 million county residents who lack health insurance as well as those who lack prescription drug coverage.

"This is a good compromise in the absence of universal health coverage," Kominski said.

Envision would profit from the program by adding a \$2.50 charge to the price it negotiates on certain drugs. If a pharmacy already offers a lower price than what Envision has negotiated, company officials said, the customer would get that lower price.

The council approved the program in 2005, but a spokeswoman for the mayor said officials did not immediately find a company that could meet their goals. They issued the request for proposals in October 2008. Villaraigosa said he had faced difficulties "convincing the city bureaucracy that we should be in the business of providing prescription drug benefits."

The paper discount cards will be sent to residents in their Department of Water and Power bills, and can be printed [online](#) at <http://forlarx.com>. They also will be available at city libraries and senior and recreation centers.

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