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Increasing Awareness and Understanding of the Health Assistance Program: A Patient Resource

Arley Donovan

Porter Primary Care - Vergennes and Middlebury, VT

July to August 2022

Preceptor: Dr. Catherine Ayers

Problem Identification and Need

▶ Problem:

- ▶ The Health Assistance Program (HAP) through the University of Vermont Medical Center/Porter Medical Center is a resource for patients in the Network who are struggling to pay for expensive but effective and clinically appropriate medications like injectables for diabetes, anticoagulation drugs or inhalers due to cost, underinsurance or interruption in insurance.
- ▶ The HAP/UVMMC Mail Order Pharmacy helps eligible low- and middle-income families who make at or below 400% of the federal poverty limit get their prescription medications at no cost, even if they have insurance.
- ▶ Lack of awareness and understanding about this program by patients and providers could potentially lead to patients self-discontinuing important medications due to cost when they do not have to. This in turn may lead to worsening outcomes and unnecessary emergency room visits and hospitalizations.

▶ Need:

- ▶ Information for patients and providers regarding qualifications and eligibility, how the program works, how to apply and contact information for the program.

AHEC Focus Areas:

- Interprofessional Education
- Medical Practice Transformation

Public Health Cost

- ▶ United States Data:
 - ▶ Nationally, among adults with current private or public coverage, insurance disruptions were associated with a lower receipt of all preventative services, with forgoing any needed care because of cost and with medication nonadherence because of cost [1]
- ▶ Vermont Data (excerpts from the 2021 VT Household Health Insurance Survey Report):
 - ▶ 91,600 people in VT make less than 400% of the federal poverty limit but do not qualify for Medicaid because they make >139% of the Federal Poverty Level [2] This is the population that could potentially qualify for free medications through the HAP.
 - ▶ 3% of the overall VT population said that they did not get needed prescription medication because they could not afford it, this percentage was increased in those who identify as African American population (9%) and Disabled (8%) [2]
 - ▶ The percentage of underinsured Vermonters younger than 65 has increased from 29% in 2014 to 38% in 2021 [2]
 - ▶ Underinsured Vermonters spend, on average, about 2.5x more on out-of-pocket costs than those not deemed underinsured. In 2021, residents 18 to 64 years old deemed underinsured spent an average of \$4,655 out-of-pocket on healthcare compared to less than \$1,900 among those who did not meet one of the definitions [2]

Community Perspective

▶ Clinical Pharmacist for Porter Primary Care:

- ▶ “The Health Assistance Program has been a great resource for patients struggling to pay for brand medications that are costly but more clinically and practically appropriate for certain patients - for example, weekly injectable diabetes medications for patients who spend a lot of time driving for work.”
- ▶ “While Medicaid patients can get their medications at very low cost and we can use discount cards for private insurance this program has really been helpful for low to middle income patients on Medicare, especially for those who enter the coverage gap”

▶ Community Representative from the Health Assistance Program:

- ▶ “The UVM Health Network decided to use 340b program which allows our hospitals to buy prescription drugs at a discounted rate and then reinvest those savings into the prescription assistance program, allowing us to stretch resources to help low- and middle-income patients access medications.”
- ▶ “We hear stories all the time from patients who are enrolled in HAP that the program is “life-changing” and that a “burden has been lifted” when they realize they do not have to stress about paying for their medications”

Intervention and Methodology

- ▶ Goal:
- ▶ *Develop an easy-to-understand patient resource in the form of informative flyer that could be placed in exam rooms that could be a reference for both patients and providers*
 - ▶ *This flyer will include the following information:*
 - ▶ *“Do I qualify for the Health Assistance Program?”*
 - ▶ *“How do I apply for the Health Assistance Program?”*
 - ▶ *“What will I get if I am part of the Health Assistance Program?”*
 - ▶ *“Who do I contact for more information regarding the Health Assistance Program?”*

Results: Sample Patient Flyer

- ▶ A flyer was created for the clinic bulletin boards regarding the program so that it could be easily referenced during visits with Providers
- ▶ Patients can also see if they might qualify for the program via the chart with common household sizes and can take down the contact information during a clinic visit

Health Assistance Program at the University of Vermont Medical Center

Are you having trouble affording certain prescription medications like injectable medications for diabetes? If so, help is available through the Health Assistance Program.

COMMON QUESTIONS

Who qualifies?

- Residents of Vermont and the service area of the UVM Health Network with a household gross monthly income of 400% or less of the federal poverty limit

| Household Size | Qualifying Monthly Income |
|----------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | </= \$4,528 |
| 2 | </= \$6,104 |
| 4 | </= \$9,248 |

- Applicants must be willing to get their prescriptions through the UVM Mail Order Pharmacy

How Much Help?

- Prescription medications at **no cost**, even if you have insurance

What do I need to apply?

- Financial documentation of your monthly income usually in the form of a prior year tax returns

For additional questions or to apply, contact the program by Phone: 802-847-6984 or Email: healthassistanceprogram@UVMHealth.org

Evaluation of Effectiveness and Limitations

▶ Evaluation of Effectiveness:

- ▶ A survey could be sent out to providers to see how often they reference the flyer in the room
- ▶ A survey could be sent out to patients to see how satisfied they are with the program and the impact it's had on their lives
- ▶ Metrics could be gathered from UVMHC Network Pharmacy reports regarding utilization of the UVM Mail Order Pharmacy as a surrogate for how many people have been entering the program

▶ Limitations:

- ▶ Flyers in the clinic rooms are often overlooked if patients are not directed to look at them
- ▶ Not everyone qualifies for free medications through this program, so it is not a universal program available for everyone in the community
- ▶ The Health Assistance Program could end in the future depending on funding availability

Future Projects

- ▶ Future projects could include creating a .dotphrase or smart text with some of the information about this program that could be put in an After Visit Summary for patients so they can bring the information home with them
- ▶ Another future project could be providing a short presentation to providers in Porter Primary Care offices regarding the details of the program in the hopes that they feel more comfortable referring patients to this resource

References

1. Yabroff, K. Roben, et al. “Health insurance disruptions and care access and affordability in the US.” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 61.1 (2021): 3-12
2. Vermont Department of Health, and Market Decisions Research prepared by: Brian Robertson, Ph.D., Mark Noyes, MPH and Anna Driscoll, BS 2021 *Vermont Household Health Insurance Survey*. March 2022
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3. Wallace, Jacob and Benjamin D. Sommers. “Health Insurance Effects on Preventative Care and Health.” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*