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### **Prescription cards offer healthy savings**

Montgomery County launches program; Harris will be next

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CONROE — Montgomery County on Wednesday became the first county in the Houston region to launch a prescription discount card program that provides as much as 20 percent savings on medication.

The program called Montgomery County Rx Discount Card is available to all county residents — with or without insurance.

Residents can pick up a card where available and begin using it at the 70 participating pharmacies in the county. No enrollment form or fee is required, officials said Wednesday in announcing the start of the program.

Harris County plans to launch a similar program in a few weeks, called HCHD Rx, said the county's hospital district spokesman, Bryan McLeod.

The Montgomery Hospital District signed up for the national plan as a way to control prescription drug costs for its indigent health care program, but it also will help thousands of uninsured and underinsured residents who don't qualify for county assistance, said Allen Johnson, the district's chief executive officer.

Those with health insurance can use the card to offset the cost of medication not covered under their plan. Prescriptions for pets also will be allowed.

"It's really an innovative and visionary way to bring savings to residents," Johnson said.

### **Volume discounts**

Montgomery County's discount card is sponsored by the National Association of Counties and administered by Caremark, a pharmaceutical services company.

Caremark is able to pass along lower rates negotiated with pharmacies by increasing the number of prescriptions filled. That allows the company to receive deeper discounts from drug manufacturers because more medication is sold.

The savings to customers — an average of 20 percent — applies to brand name and generic drugs. Customers receive as much as a 50 percent discount on three-month supplies by mail order.

About 21 percent, or 90,000 residents in Montgomery County, do not have health insurance, according to 2005 data from the Texas Medical Association. About 30 percent of Harris County residents are without coverage, McLeod said.

Of those who do have coverage, many are underinsured or do not have prescription coverage,

local officials said.

The statistics are compounded by the rising cost of medication. Retail prescription prices have increased 7.5 percent a year between 1994 and 2006 — three times the average annual inflation rate for other goods, Johnson said.

As of January, the program has saved customers about \$21 million on 2 million prescriptions for an average savings of \$10.50 per prescription, said the National Association of Counties.

In Texas, 60 counties — including San Jacinto, Webb, Dallas, Bexar and Young — participate. Nationwide, 750 counties use the program.

The counties pay a \$4,000 annual membership fee to the association, which gives the counties access to all services provided by the association, including the discount card program. Caremark handles all the rest, including producing the cards and advertising.

"The program operates without any taxes from the county," said hospital district board member John Hennigan. "As an elected official you can't ask for anything more than that."

## Use card nationwide

More than 57,000 pharmacies nationwide, including major retailers such as Walgreens, Wal-Mart and CVS, are participants. Montgomery County residents can use their card nationwide, Johnson said.

The hospital district provides emergency medical service in the county and health care assistance to the poor and to those who meet certain income and resource requirements.

The Harris County program will be administered by Envision, also a pharmaceutical services company. Residents will be able to use the discount card at 33,000 pharmacies nationwide, McLeod said.

"Everybody is looking at ways to improve on the system," McLeod said. "This will bring some needed relief to many people who don't qualify for other assistance."

Nancy Harrington, president of The Friendship Center, a nonprofit agency that serves Montgomery County senior citizens, said the savings program will help many seniors who don't qualify for Medicare and do not have jobs. She said some of the prescription plans for seniors cover up to a certain dollar amount over a designated period. The discount card will help fill the gap, she said.

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