

Prescriptions

(Continued from Page 1) set poverty level. Some of the current limits are \$20,800 for one; \$28,000 for two; \$35,200 for three; \$42,400 for a four-person household, and so forth.

The name brand medications provided directly through pharmaceutical company assistance are free to the patient. Initial prescriptions and refills are shipped from the manufacturers and delivered to the patient by mail or sent to the physician's office in a renewable 90-day supply.

Brooks says she still strives to help applicants who don't qualify to receive free, name brand medications or those whose prescriptions are not yet available through the program.

When patients don't qualify to get free name brands, one alternative is purchasing the generics, but there is a cost for those. Brooks says she can make referrals to some retailers that offer deep discounts. Among the most prominent chains offering reduced-cost generic medications is Wal-Mart, according to its recent media campaigns announcing a \$4 price on some types of prescriptions and the latest campaign with special \$10 pricing on 90-day supplies. Not all medications, however, are available in either the retailers' or Brooks' programs.

"We went from about 270 pharmaceutical companies when we started and now have 390 companies and over 4,000 medications," Brooks stated, adding, "We don't have all of them, but we do have the ones that are most commonly supplied."

"We can get everything

from Allegra to Viagra," she said, naming other popular brands, such as, Lipitor, Nasonex and Requip. "We do have some tier 2 drugs through the program, like Zanax and Valium... and tier 3, like Wellbutrin in higher dosages and Proscar."

Brooks says that the average patient has more than one prescription; if all were purchased at retail, the cost at a conservative estimate is about \$92 per month for each one.

Program Enrollment

After eligibility determination, patients who enroll in The Medicine Cabinet USA program have full support with all document preparation to meet the criteria of the pharmaceutical manufacturers providing their products free but under strict guidelines.

One requirement is that all medications are prescribed by a patient's physician. Brooks is not a medical provider, nor does she have doctors on staff. As often required, her service makes patient referrals to a group of clinics operated by Nevada Health Centers Inc. and other supportive healthcare facilities for appointments at reduced costs. For clients with existing prescriptions, the program validates the prescriptions in accordance with each manufacturer's rules.

The annual enrollment fee is \$25, and the monthly membership of \$25 is paid to the program for preparing ongoing documentation, compliance monitoring and liaison work with the manufacturers to maintain active filling of prescriptions.

Brooks says that one of the greatest challenges and

obstacles to assisting patients is her prospective clients' resistance to the four-letter word her company espouses: f-r-e-e.

"People say, 'Nothing's free' or 'I thought it was a scam.' I've heard it all," she said, expressing growing determination to spread the word throughout the community that medications for thousands in need can be obtained free.

She also says that many do not know how to seek affordable medical providers, so they go years without tending to serious conditions. Brooks discovered in her early business years that many people only see a doctor every two to four years, so she now helps with affordable healthcare resources.

Brooks says it's a life and death issue. Two of the major communities affected are Hispanics and African-Americans, in terms of highest uninsured levels and prevalence of illnesses requiring prolonged medications.

Many patients and their families spend thousands of dollars every month on prescriptions alone. The greatest danger is when patients reduce their intake, skip days, cut pills in half, or just don't get prescriptions filled — often without their doctors' knowledge.

The economic burden on families pressed to buy expensive medicine is vast and causes long-term and immediate problems: loss of retirement savings, bankruptcy, mortgage foreclosure, depletion of children's college funds, and divorce from financial stress. Brooks recalled one young woman

who gave up college to work extra jobs in order to pay for her elder relative's life-saving, high-priced medications, which "has a negative impact on the next generation."

Brooks says that some pills could cost \$10 apiece, and some prescriptions run up to thousands of dollars each month but are still free through the program.

For example, Zocor, a name brand drug for lowering cholesterol is about \$440 at one major local pharmacy for a three-month supply of the 20mg-80mg tablets. One vial of insulin is about \$80, and patients may use three to four a month. These are just two common medications available at no cost.

"Most of our members save anywhere between \$300 and \$400 per month," Brooks said.

Insulin is high on the list of frequently requested medications, and the pervasive need for that particular drug is what prompted Brooks, 42, to create her business.

"My dad is type 2 diabetic. He found himself without insurance due to divorce. The doctor told me that there were pharmaceutical companies to help you with medications or give it to you free if you qualify."

Although her father didn't qualify at the time, she says she wanted to help people with diabetes. "I became an advocate," Brooks said.

Despite her initial skepticism that pharmaceutical companies would give their high-priced products free, she contacted them and became knowledgeable in how the assistance programs work.

"There is so much markup in pharmaceuticals." She tells of doing research on a specific drug, OxyContin. "That medication costs seven cents to manufacture, and it sells for about \$18 per tablet," she stated.

"They [pharmaceutical companies] get research and development money, and they get [federal] tax breaks." That provides a strong motivation for drug manufacturers to give away medications assisted by programs like The Medicine Cabinet USA and others, Brooks said.

One nationally advertised program, Partnership for Prescription Assistance — as seen locally in television ads featuring talk show host Montel Williams and the big, orange, graphically wrapped PPA bus — provides callers with a toll-free phone line with the names of affiliated companies that may offer low-cost or free medications. On the website, the PPA program lists scores of contacts for assistance across the country.

Brooks says that her program, though similar, is more hands on and actually prepares the mandatory paperwork, which is often complex and difficult for some patients to manage themselves. Furthermore, she enlists help from new provider companies to help her members according to the specific drugs on their prescriptions.

As a patient advocate, she initially sought a federal program or a grant-funded agency to help patients, but found none — even after search help from elected officials — so she founded her own company to provide effective assistance on an af-

fordable fee basis, Brooks said.

There is one highly visible similarity between Brooks' operation and what she calls "the \$30 million, 800-number," PPA bus campaign with national spokesperson Williams: She, too, has a vehicle wrapped with professionally designed, brightly colored graphics to tout the program.

Brooks says she loves it when people come up to her vehicle and ask how she can help with "free" medications, and then she does the work, rather than just "give out a phone number to call."

She overcomes the prime challenge of doubts and suspicions in part by offering actual testimonials from patient's who authorized the company to use their names.

Diane and Patrick Cappolla are among her earliest members who give written testimonials. In a recent phone interview, Diane Cappolla stated: "She [Janice Brooks] saved our lives. I cannot tell you enough about her. I'm not just saying that. We would have been dead. I couldn't get my pain medications; it was \$800 per month... She got it for me for nothing."

The Cappollas are seniors on a fixed income and take more than six medications each. The appreciative wife, nearly in tears, added that without the medications she could not have handled her excruciating, disabling pain.

"I saw her television advertisement once. We went in there. If it wasn't anything [worthwhile], we were going to walk right back out. We ended up there for three hours," she said, adding that they have been clients for over four years.

Other testimonials tell similar stories of getting needed help through Brooks' company. In a surprise series of calls following the Gulf region hurricane disasters, to her amazement, Brooks said she was contacted by doctors seeking help for their patients in Louisiana, and she was able to help in many cases.

"They must have found out about me on the Internet," she said, adding that her company is preparing to open locations in other cities.

For now, Brooks wants the thousands of local patients in need of help to suspend their "sounds too good to be true" disbelief and let her company help them.

For more information, call (702) 444-6082 or go to TheMedicineCabinetOnline.com.



Sentinel-Voice photos by Marty Frierison

DREAMS DO COME TRUE—OVER THE RAINBOW

Dr. Anthony Pollard, left, with his wife, Diane Pollard, center, congratulates Rainbow Dreams Academy Principal Carol Threats during the official Open House celebration for the charter school last week. Joining in on the festivities were former NBA All-Star Gary Payton and his wife, along with legendary football coach John Robinson and his wife, on the right. The new school, located on the Historic Westside, was officially opened in February. Currently, the school has three grade levels — kindergarten, first and second grade.