

Coalition accuses CVS pharmacies of redlining

By Ayana Jones
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PHILADELPHIA (NNPA) — The NAACP of Philadelphia has joined a national coalition of community organizations in protesting alleged discriminatory treatment by CVS pharmacies to people of color.

During a press conference, coalition members highlighted the results of a 14-month investigation released by the Change to Win coalition in a study titled "Cure CVS: From High Prices to Low Quality, CVS is Failing Our Communities."

"We believe that health care in Philadelphia — right after violence against our children — is the number one issue facing our city. We want to make it empathically clear that after a year-long study, that CVS is a lousy corporate citizen," said J. Whyatt Mondesire, president of the NAACP of Philadelphia.

The investigation of CVS stores across the nation claims that the drug store chain failed to provide equal and fair access to its stores and services.

Furthermore, the report claimed the retailer overcharges customers, has questionable product quality control, lacks consumer privacy protection and has consumer safety issues.

"Milk, eggs, over-the-counter drugs — these are the kinds of products we found expired in high amounts at CVS stores, not only in Philadelphia but nationwide," said Change to Win spokeswoman Joanna Boulden.

According to the coalition's report, CVS operates fewer stores per person in the least affluent areas than in the wealthiest.

In Philadelphia, CVS operates 48 percent more stores per person in the wealthiest areas than in the least wealthy.

In the last five years, CVS has closed three stores in majority non-White ZIP codes in the city and has opened only one in those areas.

"Drug store redlining is a real problem," Mondesire added.

Mondesire and others are hoping to meet with CVS officials to discuss these issues.

In response, CVS Caremark Corp. spokesman Michael J. DeAngelis issued a lengthy statement.

"CVS Caremark respects the history and mission of the NAACP. We do not discriminate in our policies, our store operations or tolerate dis-

crimination of any kind in our organization. We will carefully review the information that has been released and contact the NAACP to follow up," the statement said.

"It is important to recognize that the driving force behind these inaccurate and misleading allegations is a consortium of labor unions called Change to Win. Since 2007, CtW has attempted to pressure CVS to deny our employees the full benefit of voting rights afforded to them under federal law. This report and accompanying media outreach is the latest attempt by CtW to achieve this objective.

"CVS Caremark participates cooperatively in the collective bargaining process," the statement added. "We have thousands of unionized employees and many union customers. Union members also participate in many of our store and facilities construction projects throughout the country. We believe in the right of our employees to freely choose to join a union, or not to do so, as they see fit... The allegations raised in CtW's latest 'report' are based on inaccurate and outdated information."

The retailer said it provides equal access to its stores.

"The allegation that we concentrate stores in White neighborhoods compared to our competitors is simply untrue. For example, CVS holds the number one or number two market share in eight of the top 10 U.S. markets with the largest non-White populations," the statement said.

The study said CVS is more likely to allocate conveniences like 24-hour stores and in-store mini-clinics to majority-White neighborhoods and higher income communities.

Over half of Philadelphia area's population lives in neighborhoods that are comprised of residents of color, however there is not a single 24-hour CVS in those communities.

The report indicated that unsanitary conditions were found at stores in communities of color and lower-income areas.

The investigation includes food inspection reports for the city of Philadelphia, which found that inspectors were twice as likely to cite CVS for vermin violations in the least affluent areas compared to areas with a median household income above \$40,000.

Lauren Townsend of the National Organization of Women Philadelphia chapter said there are discrepancies in the way that CVS sells condoms in its stores.

"In communities of color — where six cities were surveyed — CVS locks up condoms in more than half of the areas with the highest concentration of people of color, but never in communities that were predominantly White," Townsend said.

CVS officials countered such findings by stating that the company does not dis-

criminate in its anti-theft measures. "In a small percentage of our stores where condom products have been heavily shoplifted a majority of such products are kept in a locked display to ensure there is stock available for customers to purchase," CVS said. "Decisions to do this are based on theft experience, not ethnicity.

"However in these stores, there is also an unlocked display with a selection of condoms for purchase without asking for assistance from store employees."

According to the coal-

ition, CVS has been caught selling expired products such as infant formula, dairy products and medications.

Earlier this year, Attorney General Cuomo took legal action against CVS and Rite Aid Corp., for selling expired products in New York.

In regards to issues of consumer safety, CVS said its products are safe.

"Our policy is to remove items before the expiration date. All the products that we sell have passed rigorous regulatory and third-party quality assurance reviews," CVS said.

The retailer also stated its prices are competitive and that it makes every effort to ensure that the prices of products and services in their stores are fair. "Prices are set based on what our competition is charging, not based on geography or ethnicity," the store said.

Headquartered in Woonsocket, R.I., CVS is the nation's largest corporate drug store chain operating 6,800 stores nationwide and over 200 locations in the Philadelphia area.

Ayana Jones writes for the Philadelphia Tribune.

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