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# **A Guide for Implementing a Community-based Pharmaceutical Assistance Program**

Supporting healthier living for older adults through user-friendly access to appropriate medications, health education, community referral, and advocacy.



Based on the work of  
Senior PharmAssist in Durham, North Carolina

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## **Background**

In 1992, a task force of the Durham County Hospital Corporation conducted a needs assessment and feasibility study for a pharmaceutical assistance program for senior adults. They concluded that two public health issues needed to be addressed:

- financial access to medications for seniors with limited incomes and
- polypharmacy, the use of multiple, sometimes unnecessary, medications.

Senior PharmAssist was created to address those needs in Durham and began serving participants in 1994 as a program of the Coordinating Council for Senior Citizens. In 1998, our agency amicably separated from the Council to become an independent nonprofit organization. Since its inception, Senior PharmAssist has helped thousands of individuals and continues to thrive and adapt to serve new seniors, as well as those who have been enrolled in the program for years.

Senior PharmAssist's mission is to promote healthier living for Durham seniors by helping them obtain and better manage needed medicines, and by providing health education, community referral, and advocacy. Over the years, we have learned that services such as referral to other community programs are a vital complement to our focus on pharmaceutical care. We provide seniors with the assistance and information they need to better empower themselves to become wiser consumers and active participants in the maintenance of their own well-being. By providing a combination of services, we help older adults lead healthier, more independent lives.

## ***Program Description***

From day one, Senior PharmAssist has combined medication access with medication therapy management to ensure that our participants are maximizing the therapeutic effects of their medicines while minimizing their risks. Over the years, we have helped individuals obtain necessary medications in two primary ways:

- by providing direct financial assistance through a prescription card program to Durham seniors with limited means, and
- by helping both our participants and others maximize other sources of medication assistance, including Medicaid, our local community health center, NC Senior Care and NCRx, and drug company assistance programs.

Changes in Medicare, however, have greatly altered the prescription assistance picture. While the advent of Medicare's drug benefit has made a significant difference for many older adults and people with disabilities, many others are struggling with these privately administered drug plans, due to the complexity of the benefit and the out-of-pocket expenses involved.

In FY 2009 (July 1, 2008 – June 30, 2009), Senior PharmAssist provided one-on-one assistance to 1,139 persons, helping individuals maximize their medication benefits. Senior PharmAssist's staff helps any Medicare beneficiary in Durham County – regardless of income or age – sort through the dozens of options available each year to select the best Medicare drug plan, based on cost and each person's specific medication needs. There is no charge for this service. If individuals have extremely limited income and assets, we also help them apply for low-income subsidies from the federal government and NCRx, the state's premium assistance program that began in 2007. We advocate with and on behalf of Medicare beneficiaries if they encounter obstacles in communicating with governmental agencies, insurance companies or at the pharmacy counter.

### ***Financial Assistance***

Senior PharmAssist continues to help many individuals in Durham pay for their medicines, and in June 2007, we expanded eligibility by lowering the age for this assistance from 65 and over to 60 and over. Prior to Medicare Part D, Senior PharmAssist served as a primary payer in providing financial assistance to Durham seniors 65 and older. Those helped had incomes up to 150% of the federal poverty level (FPL), limited cash assets, and NO prescription coverage. Today, we're providing supplemental drug coverage to Durham County residents 60 and older who have incomes at or below 200% of the FPL (\$1,805/month for single individuals and \$2,428/month for couples, as of December 2009) and have Medicare drug plans but do not qualify for the government's full low-income subsidy. Senior PharmAssist also helps those 60 or older who have no prescription drug coverage but meet the other aforementioned guidelines by providing our own primary coverage for their needed medicines.

Individuals receiving our financial assistance are seen every six months for medication therapy management. This entails our pharmacists working one-on-one with participants to review each medication (prescription, over-the-counter, and herbal) they may be taking.

At Senior PharmAssist, collaboration is key. We work closely with our participants' healthcare and social service providers to ensure the best pharmaceutical care possible. We strive to communicate promptly and appropriately with the goal of collectively improving medication under-use, over-use, and inappropriate use. We have created a geriatric formulary, which is a list of medicines approved for reimbursement by Senior PharmAssist on the advice of staff and local clinicians, mostly trained in geriatrics. Clinical recommendations are based on safety and effectiveness in the geriatric population, as well as cost-effectiveness, encouraging appropriate prescribing and stretching healthcare dollars.

Our program works with community pharmacies and links these pharmacies via a third-party administrator or pharmacy benefits manager (Catalyst Rx). Participants are given a card, much like a credit card, to identify themselves as participants with Senior PharmAssist at any community pharmacy. This system allows those with limited incomes to avoid the stigma of obtaining free medications from a poor person's pharmacy. Our web-based connection to Catalyst Rx allows us to immediately enroll, update, and dis-enroll participants at any time. Participants can use our

prescription card at any community pharmacy in Durham County to obtain medications on our geriatric formulary; individuals pay \$2 for a 30-day supply of generics and \$5 for brand-name medications whether they receive our primary or supplemental coverage. They can obtain a 90-day supply of non-narcotics at any one time on a pro-rated basis (i.e. \$6 for a three months' supply of a generic medication).

### ***Helping others***

Those who don't qualify for our drug coverage can still receive significant help from Senior PharmAssist. We determine the best way to serve such individuals based on their age, income, place of residence, and drug coverage status. We continue to help older adults in Durham who are eligible for the federal government's full low-income subsidy as many of them have been in our program for years. While they do not need our direct help paying for medications, they do need our assistance to:

- ensure they stay enrolled in Medicare-approved drug plans that cover their medications at the lowest cost;
- keep their low-income subsidy eligibility active;
- manage their medications; and
- tap into other valuable community and/or governmental resources.

Medicare beneficiaries above our income guidelines for supplemental drug coverage are also eligible for free assistance with Medicare drug plan selection and tailored referral to other valuable programs. In addition, these individuals are eligible for our medication therapy management services at little or no charge if they are eligible for a state program called ChecKmeds NC, or they pay based on a sliding fee scale.

Senior PharmAssist also helps younger Medicare beneficiaries (people with disabilities), who do not qualify for our financial assistance, to select the best Medicare drug plan and apply for the government's low-income subsidy as needed. And individuals younger than 60 who are not Medicare-eligible receive tailored information about the drug manufacturers' patient assistance programs or other potential sources of medication assistance.

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## **About This Guide**

### ***Purpose***

In response to a growing number of requests from communities, we developed and revised this manual (originally written in January 1996 and revised in January 2000) to support efforts in other communities to start or revise their medication assistance programs. Because every county responds to different needs and has access to varying resources, each assistance program will be uniquely designed to fit the specific needs of that county. For this reason, this guide is not intended to be a step-by-step recipe book but rather a way to share ideas and suggestions based on our experience at Senior PharmAssist.

Some counties may want to adopt the entire program plan; others may want to use only some of the ideas outlined here. In any case, we hope that this guide is a useful source of information and inspiration for readers, aiding their efforts to help people of all ages access and safely use medications.

### ***Organization***

This guide is written in a rough chronological order for setting up a program. The process begins with clearly defining the problem you are addressing (Ch. 1) and completing an assessment of community resources and needs (Ch. 2). This is followed by building community partnerships (Ch.3) and determining whom you will seek to serve (Ch. 4) to ascertain who and how many people will participate in your program.

The next steps provide structure and support to carry out your programs. They begin with building an organizational structure (Ch. 5), developing sustainable funding strategies (Ch. 6), and establishing a formulary (Ch. 7). This process takes time. It may even take up to a couple of years of preliminary work before the program actually begins. Once you are underway, Chapters 8 through 14 provide strategies for program and organizational development. Chapter 15 closes the guide with lessons learned.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

Information in this document was collected through consultation with staff members at Senior PharmAssist and leaders throughout North Carolina involved in various aspects of drug assistance and medication management programs or who had interest in beginning one. Conversations with these individuals provided valuable direction for this guide. We also used a previous iteration of this document as a starting point.