

## Prescription Drug Donation and the Private Sector—Why Ohio’s Medical Students Should Care

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### ABSTRACT

This perspective piece discusses the important role donation of prescription medication from the private sector plays in the financial health of Ohio’s free clinics and the patients they serve. It also discusses recent changes in Ohio’s nursing home industry that have altered this vital pipeline, why medical students should care about them, and a personal anecdote from the author about the impact these changes can have on patients.

**Keywords:** prescriptions, prescription donation, drug depository, free clinics

### LEGISLATIVE INNOVATIONS IN RESPONSE TO RISING PRESCRIPTION EXPENSES

Out-of-pocket cost is a consistent predictor of patient nonadherence to a prescription medication regimen.<sup>1,2</sup> As such, decreasing these expenses is a public health intervention that has been shown to improve patient adherence and, ultimately, health outcomes.<sup>2,3</sup>

Partially due to increased prescription costs, the nationwide demand for services of free clinics has increased, with more than 1.8 million patients seeking care at 1200+ free clinics.<sup>4</sup> Just as medication expenses can lead to nonadherence, threatening the health of individual patients, it can also threaten the financial health of free clinics. For some, prescription expenses have ballooned to 58-63% of total expenditures.<sup>5,6</sup> In the United States, legislation has been passed to allow charitable donation of prescription medication to registered free clinics and charitable pharmacies. In 40 states, including Ohio, additional legislation establishing “Drug Donation Repository” programs has also been passed.<sup>7,8</sup> Broadly speaking, Drug Donation Repository legislation allows prescription recipients and private entities (such as manufacturers, wholesalers, nursing homes, long-term care facilities, etc.) to donate prescription medication to free clinics and charitable pharmacies, as long as the medication is not expired and is in its original packaging.<sup>7,8</sup> Repository programs have allowed several states to repurpose tens of millions of dollars’ worth of medication that would otherwise be disposed of.<sup>7,9</sup>

### OHIO’S FREE CLINICS AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

In the State of Ohio, over 50 free clinics provide services to more than 100,000 patients annually, including medical student-run free clinics.<sup>10,11</sup> Ohio passed legislation in 2003 establishing a Drug Donation Repository program, which was the first in the nation to allow nursing homes and long-term care pharmacies to become donors of medication.<sup>8,12</sup> Since its inception, Ohio’s program has redistributed several million dollars’ worth of prescriptions, including more than half a million annually in the past several years.<sup>13</sup>

However, due to recent corporate mergers, the nursing home industry in Ohio has undergone significant consolidation, with negative impacts on the Ohio Drug Donation Repository. In 2015, CVS purchased Omnicare, which had been the United States’ largest provider of pharmaceutical services in nursing homes.<sup>14</sup> Before its acquisition by CVS, Omnicare was a significant contributor to the Ohio Drug Donation Repository. However, after purchasing Omnicare, CVS elected to cease donations to Ohio’s program, citing a need to comply with the federal 2013 Drug Supply Chain Security Act (DSCSA) and contractual agreements with pharmaceutical manufacturers.<sup>12</sup> While the DSCSA requires corporate entities to take steps to prevent consumers from exposure to “counterfeit, stolen, contaminated, or otherwise harmful” drugs, the legislation that governs Ohio’s Repository program grants legal immunity to all participants so long as medications are donated in good faith.<sup>15,16</sup> While no formal analysis has yet been conducted as to the impact of CVS’ withdrawal, participants in the program have remarked that this would likely “hurt [the Ohio Drug Donation Repository program] quite a bit”.<sup>12</sup>

## WHY OHIO MEDICAL STUDENTS SHOULD CARE

Today, there are at least 111 medical student-run free clinics, including five in Ohio.<sup>17-23</sup> While not all of these free clinics offer prescription services, the ones that do report spending similar percentages of their budgets on medications as those that are not student-run.<sup>5,6</sup> Maintaining the financial security of these clinics should thus be a priority for medical students because for many, especially in the preclinical years, the experiences gained at these clinics remind them why they chose a career in medicine.<sup>17,18</sup>

I speak from personal experience in this regard. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I volunteered as a laboratory technician at OPEN M, a free clinic in Akron, both as an undergraduate and a preclinical medical student. The experiences I had there as a volunteer kept me connected to my original reasons for wanting to become a physician during a time when I was otherwise far removed from clinical medicine. But one night in September 2018, the clinic ran out of metformin. I queried the clinic chief about how this happened, as metformin seemed like an important medication to keep a large stock of. The chief replied that their metformin stock had significantly decreased after CVS withdrew from the Drug Donation Repository. As a result, the patients with a metformin prescription—many without personal transportation and working jobs that gave little or no paid time off—would have to come back to the clinic much earlier than they otherwise would have to refill their prescriptions. As such, this unfortunate indirect effect of the CVS withdrawal from the Drug Donation Repository directly affected the clinic and the medically underserved populations it served.

Clinical experiences at free clinics help keep many medical students connected to why they chose medicine as a career. Thus, to preserve both the financial health of these clinics and the patients they serve, Ohio's medical students should advocate for increased participation in the Ohio Drug Donation Repository.

## CONCLUSIONS

Prescription drug donation from corporate entities to Ohio's free clinics via the Ohio Drug Donation Repository serves an important role in maintaining the financial well-being of both the clinics and the patients they serve. However, recent consolidation in Ohio's nursing home industry has threatened the program's viability. Medical students, being vitally invested in the health of many of these clinics, should monitor these developments, and advocate for increased participation in the program.

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### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Mr. Markle currently serves as the medical student representative on the Ohio State Medical Association's (OSMA) Political Action Committee (PAC). He is the primary author of OSMA Policy 16—2020, designed to increase private and public-sector awareness of the Ohio Drug Donation Repository and the free clinics it serves. No financial support was given to aid the writing of this article.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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