



February 13, 2017

## Pharmacy Deserts on the West Side

I recently learned that there will likely be a pharmacy desert on the West Side of Chicago that will greatly affect our community when the CVS Pharmacy at 3146 W. Madison at Kedzie, opened in 2011, will close in a few weeks. There was a private pharmacy (Kedzie and Madison Pharmacy) across the street for about 30 years, but that pharmacy closed about a year ago and their prescriptions were transferred to the CVS.

The Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, has been great in increasing access to care through the expansion of Medicaid and insurance through the exchanges. For the first time, people who had Obamacare coverage could take a prescription from their doctor to their local pharmacy just like anyone else with private insurance. They could obtain medications quickly for their hypertension, diabetes or depression instead of waiting for hours at the Fantus Clinic pharmacy as they used to do. But, what good is it to get a prescription that is covered by your health care coverage if a pharmacy isn't available in your community?

UIC Pharmacy Assistant Professor Dr. Dima M. Qato recently mapped proximity and access to drug stores in neighborhoods across Chicago. She and her colleagues found that nearly 1 million people in the South and West Sides of Chicago — areas with a high percentage of black or Latino residents — live in “pharmacy deserts,” where just getting to a drug store poses a challenge.

The study, published in the journal *Health Affairs* in November 2014, defined having no pharmacy within a half-mile as a pharmacy desert for a low-income community with limited vehicle accessibility. For communities with adequate vehicle accessibility, the defining radius extends to a mile.

According to Qato's study, between 2000 and 2010, Chicago's white communities saw a 20 percent increase in the number of pharmacies. The number of pharmacies in Chicago's black or Hispanic neighborhoods did not increase. Among the nearly 1 million people who live in Chicago's pharmacy deserts, more than half are in black communities. “There are persistent racial and ethnic disparities in the use of prescription medications,” said Qato. The study concluded that disparities in medication use and health outcomes may worsen if future policies continue to focus exclusively on insurance coverage and fail to ensure the geographic accessibility of pharmacies in minority communities.

Closing the CVS store location at Madison and Kedzie would create another pharmacy desert. This pharmacy is vital for patients on the West Side, especially for the many patients across the street at Bobby E. Wright Community Behavioral Health Center, for patients going to other nearby clinics like Lawndale Christian Health Center at Carroll and Kedzie, and for people experiencing homelessness up and down what is known as the “Kedzie Corridor”, from Roosevelt Road to Chicago Avenue, where many shelters and services for those experiencing homelessness are located. Other full-service pharmacies in the area are long walks of more than a mile away - up to 8 and 14 blocks away.

Now, some may say that this is a strict business decision and CVS has a right to close a store if it wants to. But, CVS, which stopped selling cigarettes in 2014 to promote health and healthy communities, now uses the brand purpose "Health is everything." Is CVS really serious and committed to our community's health by pulling out of a very vulnerable community and creating a pharmacy desert at the same time, especially after a small business pharmacy in business for

30 years was forced to close after the CVS was built across the street? Norman de Greve, senior VP, chief marketing officer of the \$153.3 billion CVS brand, recently said, "...I contend it's impossible to be a purpose-driven brand unless you are a purpose driven-company -- ours is helping people on their path to better health." Does CVS want better health for the West Side, too?

What about special financing or tax credits? Some say that the city of Chicago has no money, but city taxpayers will pony up \$55 million in tax increment financing dollars to construct a brand-new DePaul University basketball arena and accompanying hotel in the South Loop and have already spent \$2 million on a public park near McCormick Place and \$57 million to build a new Cermak-McCormick Place stop on the CTA's Green Line. Do we have the courage to demand some sort of special financing for businesses important for the health of our community on the West Side? Do we have the courage to ask businesses that might be struggling to work with their local chambers of commerce to create a vibrant, safe and healthy community? How can we all work together – community members, doctors, pharmacies, elected officials, neighborhood organizations and advocates – to ensure that we have a healthy community desired by all?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Ford', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford  
State Representative-Eighth District