



Grand Rapids African American Health Institute

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## **Some health plans make it harder for patients to get prescription drugs**

*Medicaid HMOs continue to have barriers to access to prescription drugs while  
Commercial HMOs – such as PHP of Michigan – improve*

DETROIT – While Michigan’s commercial health plans generally improved patient access to prescription drugs over the past year, Medicaid plans on average reduced access to medications for the state’s poorest citizens, a new report shows.

Patients with commercial insurance saw their access to prescription drugs *increase* an average 8.8 percentage points, according to the biannual report by the Grand Rapids African American Health Institute (GRAAHI), an independent, nonprofit group working to end health disparities in Michigan. ***Most notably, according to the GRAAHI report, access for Medicaid patients with Lansing-based PHP of Mid-Michigan increased by more than 42 percentage points over the past year.***

Meanwhile, ***across the state's Medicaid plans examined by the report,*** Medicaid patients saw their access *decrease* by an average 2 percentage points.

“It’s well-known that when insurers make it harder and more expensive for patients to obtain prescription drugs, patients are less likely to take those medications, which means they get sicker,” said Dr. Lonnie Joe, MD, president of the Detroit Medical Society and a representative of GRAAHI in Southeast Michigan. “When you’re talking about Medicaid, those patients are more likely to be black than white, so health disparities are created.”

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GRAAHI issues its report every six months, coinciding with the open enrollment period for employer health plans – going on now – and in the spring, when Medicaid has open enrollment. The intent is to give all consumers more information on the insurance benefit they’re most likely to use, so they can choose the best plan for them.

The report, available at [www.GRAAHI.org](http://www.GRAAHI.org), ranks prescription drug coverage across 21 Michigan-based health plans and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

For the first time, the report was distributed to insurance brokers, who work with employers in developing insurance plans for workers. GRAAHI also plans to expand the report to other states in the spring.

“Increasingly, this tool is showing up on the radar screens of people in positions of influence when it comes to directing people to specific insurers,” said Dr. Khan Nedd, MD, chairman of the GRAAHI board. “The prescription drug benefits can be a big draw.”

The new findings showed that Medicaid patients served by certain HMOs in the Detroit, Flint and Lansing areas saw their access to prescription drugs plummet by between 15.7 and 31.9 percentage points.

In contrast, access for Medicaid patients with Lansing-based PHP of Mid-Michigan increased by more than 42 percentage points over the past year. GRAAHI will honor PHP with an award later this month.

“PHP of Mid-Michigan works very hard to ensure that patients get the best care in the most efficient manner possible,” said Scott Wilkerson, President and CEO, PHP of Mid-Michigan. “This has always been our mission, but this award is welcome affirmation of a job well-done.”

Health plans were rated according to how easy they made it for patients to obtain prescription drugs. Hefty co-pays and “hassle factors,” such as requiring patients to obtain prior authorization for a medication, contributed to lower rankings.

The overall rankings evaluated access to 141 medications used to treat four major diseases affecting African Americans: cardiovascular disease, asthma, diabetes and mental health problems such as depression.

“Consumers should be looking at the pharmacy benefit before signing up for a health plan,” Joe said. “When they make better choices, they can take better care of themselves.

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