

AUSTIN guarantee clinics' indigent patients get prescriptions without discrimination, delay: New provision is response some U.S. pharmacists' refusal to fill contraception prescriptions.

By KATE ALEXANDER

August 18, 2005

Austin American Statesman

A provision to be added to an Austin prescription drug contract for indigent patients will require a pharmacy manager to ensure that a prescription is filled "without discrimination or delay" if an individual pharmacist refuses to do so because of personal beliefs.

If the City Council approves the amended contract today, a Planned Parenthood spokeswoman said she thinks that Austin will become the first city to mandate such a protection for patients. Several states have already granted the protection, and the U.S. Congress is planning to consider the issue as well.

The \$14 million, five-year contract with Walgreens Health Initiatives provides drug coverage for the 50,000 indigent patients who receive medical care through the Travis County Hospital District health clinics.

Austin runs those clinics for the hospital district. The City Council is expected to approve the amended contract today.

Incidents have popped up across the country in which pharmacists would not fill prescriptions for birth control and emergency contraception because of personal beliefs.

There have been no reports of any similar problems under this contract, said Elaine Carroll, patient services administrator for the city's Community Care Services Department.

Emergency and oral contraception prescriptions are rarely filled at the contracted pharmacies because the drugs are dispensed at the clinics, Carroll said.

The policy in Walgreens stores nationwide requires the transfer of the prescription to a nearby store that can fill it if the store's only available pharmacist refuses to do so, said company spokeswoman Tiffani Bruce.

The new provision ensures that a patient will get the prescription at the same pharmacy and without delay, as long as the drug is in stock.

"We respect our pharmacists' beliefs, but we have an absolute obligation to our patients and we will make sure our patients' needs are met before they leave our store," Bruce said.

Council Member Brewster McCracken, who led the effort to add the provision, said the use of taxpayers money should guarantee access to medical care.

"I'm proud Austin is the first city in the country to do this," McCracken said.

Company representatives approved the new language after two weeks of discussion, according to McCracken's office.

Most pharmacies already do what the contract provision would require, said Carolyn McCrate Hajduk, a Houston pharmacist affiliated with Pharmacists for Life International.

"Everyone should be allowed to follow their conscience on these matters," Hajduk said. "As long as the pharmacist isn't pressured to fill it under the threat of losing their job, then I don't see a problem."

Danielle Tierney, director of public affairs for Planned Parenthood of the Texas Capital Region, said the inclusion of the patient-protection provision sends the message to other corporations that "if you want to do business with Austin, these are the terms."