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Seniors hope and wonder if Maine Rx can prevail

By MARK PETERS, Portland Press Herald
Writer

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Norman Quirion applauded the U.S. Supreme Court's decision Monday clearing the way for a discount drug program in Maine. But he didn't cancel his trip to Canada to buy prescription medicines.

Although hopeful that the program, Maine Rx, may lower the \$4,000 he spends annually on prescription drugs, the retired Waterville police officer is not taking any chances. Come August, Quirion, 71, will cross the border into St. Stephen, New Brunswick, to have his prescriptions filled.

Seniors and advocacy groups declared the court's ruling a victory. No one, however, saw the program's future as guaranteed, with some describing a variety of obstacles Maine Rx could face before saving a single senior a single dollar.

"I think (the ruling) is a real

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plus, but it is not a total victory," said John Carr, president of the Maine Council of Senior Citizens.

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The ruling removed a U.S. District Court injunction that has prevented the program - approved by the state Legislature in 2000 - from going into effect. State officials will push to have Maine Rx up and running by the end of the year. The program could benefit an estimated 325,000 uninsured Maine residents.

It is help that Paulette Beaudoin of Biddeford wants. The cost of her 14 medications for ailments that include osteoporosis and arthritis are eating up her savings.

"I am still hoping for a bus in the fall," said Beaudoin, 69, who takes a bus sponsored by the senior citizens council to Canada to get some of her medications. But for some seniors in poor health, she said, the bus trip is too difficult.

Other seniors in more dire situations are skipping meals or forgoing pain medications because of the cost of prescription drugs, advocates say.

Maine Rx would provide seniors and others without drug coverage a discount of about 25 percent on the cost of prescriptions. The state would use its Medicaid buying power to negotiate prices with drug companies.

But seniors and advocacy groups see several potential problems that could stall Maine Rx.

The ruling "is not going to make a change next week," said Tom Bradley, staff attorney for the Maine Citizen Leadership Fund.

Bradley said the state has to set up a system through which residents can receive the discounts, and it also has to get drug companies to the table to negotiate lower prices. A federal waiver also may be required.

Then, there is the possibility of further court challenges. Seniors contacted Monday expect the pharmaceutical industry to continue its opposition. The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America released a statement saying the Supreme Court decision returns its lawsuit against the state to federal trial court.

Robert Goldman of Cape Elizabeth, a member of the senior council, said pharmaceutical companies have large resources that could keep Maine Rx tied up in court.

"I think the pharmaceutical companies will fight this to the end," Quirion said.

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