



# The Southern Illinoisan: Lowering Prescription Drug Costs

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Recently, I opened a letter from a constituent in Illinois. The woman—a nurse—was writing to me about her husband, a diabetic who has to use insulin four times per day. But a little while ago, as a result of insurance delays, he found himself without health coverage for two months—a span in which his insulin costs alone came out to more than \$2,900.

The two of them were frantic. They went round and round with their local pharmacist, desperate to find some—any—solution to get him the medication he urgently needed. His blood sugar levels doubled over the course of about 12 weeks, until, finally, they reached a point where they were forced to take out a loan to pay for the prescription his life depended on.

This family isn't alone. A recent poll found that this is a nationwide crisis, with [9 out of 10](#) voters saying that drug pricing reform is important to them in the upcoming elections.

There are an obvious series of steps forward here. First, the United States Senate must pass legislation to cap the cost of insulin—commonsense, life-saving legislation that could and should garner bipartisan support. Then, we must keep pushing forward and do even more to lower the cost of prescription drugs for all Americans. Because while insulin costs far, far too much, so do many other medications. The only way we in the Senate can adequately address this crisis for working families is to pass legislation that cuts costs for taxpayers and patients at the pharmacy counter, including by giving Medicare the ability to negotiate drug prices.

On average, Americans pay [two to four times](#) what people in other developed countries pay for prescription drugs, with seniors and families bearing the brunt of this discrepancy. Meanwhile, these high prices have major consequences on our collective health and wellbeing as a society, with a third of Americans reporting they've been forced to [skip refilling their prescriptions](#) due to high costs—a dangerous choice that has cost too many their lives.

As a Veteran, I'm able to afford the medications I need in part because the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs can negotiate with drug companies to make my prescriptions more affordable. But millions of other Americans don't have that option.

So it's time for us to level the playing field. We all deserve affordable prescription drugs when we need them, along with a healthcare system that actually prioritizes our wellbeing over Big Pharma's bottom line. That shouldn't be too much to ask.

We know this model works because of the success we've seen with the VA's negotiations with drug companies. When I led the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, I petitioned to move the State of Illinois's Veterans homes from under the federal Department of Veterans Affairs' formulary. The result was huge savings for the state's taxpayers.

Today, as our country enters the third year of a pandemic that continues to threaten both our families' health and the health of our nation's economy, the rising cost of everyday items is putting a squeeze on far too many workers. While many factors go into the inflation we're feeling today, one concrete action Congress can—and should—take is to stop the price-gouging that countless corporations, including pharmaceutical companies, benefit from at working families' expense. After all, drug prices [increased faster than inflation](#) for half of all drugs covered by Medicare in 2020, and in 2022, drug corporations have already [raised the price on over 800](#) prescription medicines by more than 5 percent.

I hear every day from my constituents about the life-and-death stakes of this fight. I get letters from Democrats, Republicans, independents, you name it, including the nurse

whose family's heartbreaking story inspired me to write this piece today. I get calls from seniors in Southern Illinois and college students in Chicago, who tell me that their loved ones—their mothers or daughters, their neighbors or roommates—are counting on me, on us, to act. That they can't afford another month of sky-high prescriptions, and so they've begun to consider taking a little less than the recommended dosage, forced to risk their health, even their lives, in order to make the medicine they have on hand last a little longer.

Congress has talked about lowering the cost of prescription drugs for a generation. But now, victory is within our grasp. We have the votes for this kind of much-needed, broad-scoped reform that could save lives and let countless families escape the impossible choice between being able to feed their kids and being able to afford their kids' prescriptions.

So let's get to work. Let's call the vote before another mom in Carbondale is forced to break another one of her pills in half or another 25-year-old in student loan debt is forced to ration his insulin. In year three of this pandemic, let's do something to give these families struggling with high prescription drug costs the relief they so urgently need.