



Highland Pharmacy at Brooks Landing opened in the 19th Ward, helping combat the lack of pharmacies in the neighborhood. PHOTOS BY JUSTICE MARBURY/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Coalition tackles pharmacy closures

Rochester health systems unite in wake of Walgreens' exits

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On Sept. 19, Walgreens announced the closure of several locations across the city, leaving many neighborhoods without nearby pharmacy services.

In response, Mayor Malik Evans held a press conference on Nov. 19 to address the community's concerns.

"We will no longer have a pharmacy desert," Evans said at the press conference with Rochester's four most prominent health systems.

What is the Rochester Pharmacy Access Coalition?

Representatives from Jordan Health, Rochester Regional Health, Trillium Health, and the University of Rochester Medical Center (URMC) – typically competitors – have established the Rochester Pharmacy Access Coalition. Through this partnership, the health care organizations will provide pharmacy services to the general public, expanding access beyond their own patients.

"In this moment of a national chain's disinvestment, community leaders in



Highland Pharmacy fills about 275 prescriptions daily.

Rochester stepped forward, as they have so many times before," Evans said. "Rather than viewing the closure as a setback, they saw it as an opportunity to rally together, leveraging their collective vision and resilience."

URMC recently opened Highland Pharmacy at Brooks Landing, near Brooks Avenue and Genesee Street. The pharmacy fills approximately 275 prescriptions daily and offers delivery and pickup services.

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"In this moment of a national chain's disinvestment, community leaders in Rochester stepped forward, as they have so many times before."

Malik Evans
Rochester mayor

Coalition

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“This location provided a unique opportunity to address a need in the 19th Ward, which was created after the closure of a retail pharmacy on Thurston Road,” said Dr. Curt Haas, chief pharmacy officer at the University of Rochester Medical Center. “URMC had previously operated this pharmacy at the Jordan Health Center on Holland Street. As Jordan began to manage pharmacy operations on its own, we worked with the community to relocate URMC’s pharmacy to an area of need.”

Dr. Casey Wilbert, vice president and chief pharmacy officer at Rochester Regional Health, announced that St. Mary’s Apothecary, located near the Bulls Head neighborhood, is also available to serve those affected by the recent Walgreens closures.

“Ensuring everyone has access to high-quality care regardless of their ability to pay has been Jordan Health’s mission for the last 100 years. It’s an issue of equity,” said Dr. Linda Clark, president and CEO of Jordan Health. “We are purposefully located in parts of the city with the greatest health disparities, and we are working on all fronts to combat these inequities.”

What is a pharmacy desert?

A pharmacy desert is defined as a community where the average distance to the nearest pharmacy exceeds specific thresholds based on the area’s characteristics:

- In urban areas, it is more than one mile away.
- In suburban areas, it is more than two miles away.

- In rural areas, it is more than 10 miles away.

A study published earlier this year in the Oxford Academic Journal revealed that 15.8 million people in the U.S. – or 4.7% of the population – live in pharmacy deserts. These communities often have higher rates of individuals without health insurance and those with ambulatory disabilities.

Why pharmacies nationwide are closing

Major pharmacy chains like Walgreens, CVS, and Rite Aid are closing hundreds of stores across the United States due to financial pressures, including declining profitability, lower insurance reimbursement rates, and shifting consumer habits. Walgreens plans to close around 1,200 locations, CVS aims to shutter approximately 900 stores (about 10% of its total), and Rite Aid is also scaling back operations with significant closures.

Despite the challenges, the new coalition believes it can provide a safety net for residents who need it most.

“We’re not waiting for anybody else to come save us,” Evans said. “We’re saving ourselves.”

As a Rochester native, Justice Marbury entered the world of journalism to create work where voices like hers were heard – the voices of minority communities. Marbury covers small businesses, neighborhood concerns, and the interesting people who live in Rochester’s 19th Ward. As the 19th Ward reporter, she has helped implement community outreach ideas by asking what people in various communities want to read about themselves in addition to regular news. *Contact her on Instagram @justice_marbury and by email at jmarbury@gannett.com.*