

Florida pharmacies taking orders from crisis-hit Venezuela

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The phone rings off the hook these days at some pharmacies in Florida and the calls are long-distance: from Venezuelans desperate for everything from diapers to cancer medication.

Venezuela, though sitting atop the world's largest proven oil reserves, is enduring an acute economic crisis due in part to the global drop in crude prices and just about everything is in short supply, including [medicine](#).

So people are phoning in prescriptions to a handful of pharmacies in south Florida that are willing to help, although a shortage of dollars in Venezuela means most of the orders cannot be filled: Venezuelans cannot pay for the medicine with local currency, just greenbacks, which they do not have.

Still, the pharmacies are doing what they can.

The flood of calls is so great that one [pharmacy](#) set up a phone line just to take calls from Venezuela, said Walter Cohen, head of international sales for Locatel, a Venezuelan pharmacy chain that has two outlets in south Florida.

In the five years that these pharmacies have been accepting prescriptions from abroad and offering to send medicine to Venezuela "the increase has been exponential," Cohen said.

Every week the pharmacy receives about 1,000 orders for things such as

medicine, vitamins and even medical equipment.

Besides Locatel, some other pharmacies, courier services and civil society organizations have stepped up to try to make it easier to send medicine to the hard-pressed people of Venezuela.

The opposition in Venezuela has gone so far as to say the country is suffering a full-blown humanitarian crisis.

But the leftist government of President Nicolas Maduro defends itself by blaming the crisis on what it says are conservative business interests maneuvering to topple him.

And as that fight grinds on, pharmacy telephones in Florida ring and ring and ring.

Basic stuff

"We receive countless calls at the pharmacy, each with a different story, people asking for such little things as anti-inflammatories, catheters, basic things that people simply cannot get a hold of," said Miguel Gonzalez, one of the owners of Pharm Aid, in the town of Pembroke Pines.

The medicines most commonly requested are for chronic diseases such as [high blood pressure](#) or diabetes, or to battle cancer. But Venezuelans also call in for [birth control pills](#) and even diapers, pharmacy employees said.

This is happening because Florida law allows pharmacies to accept medical prescriptions from abroad. The actual paperwork is usually sent by fax.

If the medicine requested is not available in the United States, the Venezuela-friendly pharmacies are good at suggesting alternatives or medicines with the same active ingredient as in the ones being ordered.

But payment is indeed a problem. The pharmacies only accept dollars, and they are hard to come by in Venezuela because of strict currency controls.

"We pay our suppliers in dollars, we sell for dollars. We have no other way to do it," said Cohen, who is Venezuelan himself. His company works with private foundations to try to make medicine more affordable for people back home.

Because of the currency pitfall only about 10 percent of the orders received are actually filled, Cohen said. So this kind of business "is not really economically viable for us."

But the cases that do work out are a source of true satisfaction for the pharmacy. "People call us to say 'thank you, you saved us. Those calls are what make all of this worthwhile and possible," said Cohen.

Pharm Aid often waives shipping costs when the medicine is expensive, said Freddy Abreu, another owner of the pharmacy.

Family support

Venezuelans are also relying on relatives in south Florida, where Venezuelan emigrants tend to settle.

"Here is where I buy my mother's medicine for high blood pressure," Venezuelan Oralia Martinez said while shopping at Locatel. She arrived in Florida a year ago on a student visa, and sends medicine home to her 72-year-old mother and other relatives.

Courier companies that send things from Florida to Venezuela report that more and more they are sending packages with medicine.

Because of Venezuela's economic crisis—in which goods in short supply include essentials such as toilet paper and soap, besides food—one of the couriers, Terra Overseas, does not charge for shipping medicine.

"At first we sent a lot of appliances, a lot of clothing. But now with the crisis in Venezuela we mainly send medicine and basic necessities, such as food and soap," said Lady Guillen-Rivera, vice president of Terra Overseas.

It is based in Doral, near Miami and with a large Venezuelan community.

Since the company stopped charging for shipping medication, orders have skyrocketed and its employees are working overtime.

"We have family there and every day we hear about the hardships they are enduring. So it is no longer a matter of doing business. It is not about money, but rather we need to help," said Guillen-Rivera.

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