



Sharps collection provides a safe, convenient solution to a nationwide problem.

Combating the opioid crisis with drug takeback programs

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Yesterday about 175 people died in the United States from an overdose of prescription opioid drugs. Tomorrow we will lose 175 more, and every other day of the year, on average. Among people 25-65 years old, drug overdose caused more deaths last year than motor

vehicle traffic crashes. Opioid addiction has been declared a Public Health Crisis by the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. According to the U.S. government, more than 50,000 Americans died of overdoses in 2015, and the number rose to a startling 64,000



Leftover medicines are deposited in secure bins at pharmacies, clinics and police stations.

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in 2016. But where do all these drugs come from?

Ninety-two million Americans, or 38% of the entire population, received prescriptions last year for opioids like Vicodin, Methadone, Fentanyl and other potent pain-relieving medications. More than a third of the medications are never taken for their intended use. Unsure of how to dispose of them, consumers let them linger in drawers and medicine cabinets. Children and the elderly are suffering accidental overdoses in startling numbers.

Seventy percent of people who misuse painkillers report getting the drugs from a friend or a relative. Some of the drugs find their way into the wrong hands and end up on the black market, contributing to local crime problems.

In addition to the concerns about proliferation of drugs, many areas worry about the impact on local water supplies. In the absence of safe and convenient alternatives, consumers often flush leftover medications, leading to toxic effects on aquatic organisms and human health.

Similar concerns arise with needles. Whether used to inject medications for diabetes, hepatitis or other illnesses, or for less sanctioned purposes, disposal of needles and other medical sharps is a problem in every American city and county. As with medications, easy and safe disposal options are scarce. Residents throw them in the trash, drop them in the recycling bin or flush them down the toilet. Used needles litter the ground of parks and beaches. Workers on recycling sorting lines are getting

dangerous needle sticks, interrupting operations and requiring expensive treatment. Needles show up in the filters of wastewater treatment plants. Public health and safety is at risk.

For all of these reasons, local and state governments have been taking action, developing innovative new approaches to getting these drugs off their streets and out of their water supplies. California's Alameda County was the first to pass a local ordinance requiring pharmaceutical companies to establish and pay for a local drug collection program. They were challenged all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, but prevailed at every step.

“We felt we had to take action,” said Alameda County Supervisor Nate Miley. “Safe and convenient medical disposal programs are one of the most effective solutions in preventing negative individual and environmental health impacts.”

Alameda County's victory prompted others to follow suit. Now a number



Pharmacist Janet Dumonchelle is thrilled with the new meds bin at Sacramento State.

of counties in California, several in Washington State, and others scattered across the country have similar programs. Massachusetts was the first to take a statewide approach, and New York is currently debating a similar step.

The various programs take slightly different approaches. Among the most comprehensive is one in Santa Cruz County, California. Building on a successful voluntary program operating since 2006, the County Board of Supervisors took the unusual steps of requiring all pharmacies to participate, and of including medical sharps as well as drugs. The results are impressive. Thousands of pounds of used needles

and leftover medicines are routinely returned to the pharmacies for proper disposal. Private licensed carriers collect the material and send it on for disposal in facilities with specialized permits. It's easy, and convenient, and best of all for the county, the pharmaceutical industry pays for it all. Local governments in California and across the country are taking notice.

"It's really made a difference," according to Santa Cruz County Public Works Director John Presleigh. "We're getting thousands of pounds of drugs and needles out of the waste stream, out of our waters, and off of our streets and beaches. It's really helped a lot."

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Looking to industry to fund waste collection and disposal programs is relatively new to the U.S., although it is common in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Called "Product Stewardship" or "Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)," the approach is proving effective with sharps and pharmaceutical waste and is getting a serious look for its potential to address some of the nation's other challenging waste disposal problems, from batteries to tobacco and electronic waste.

In California, the California Product Stewardship Council has assisted numerous cities and counties in developing programs. Their national affiliate, the National Stewardship Action Council, has provided similar support across the country. Heidi Sanborn, executive director of both groups, is a tireless advocate for the product stewardship approach.

"Producer responsibility is the only approach that provides a sustainable funding source for a program that can be national, have a harmonized public education message, make it free to dispose and as convenient to collect meds as it was to buy them, and use the best available technologies of the day for safe disposal for a small or large quantity of medications," Sanborn said. "There is no other private sector or public sector program that can achieve all those goals."

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