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Maine leading nation in Rx drug mail-back

By [Aimee Dolloff](#)
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During a press conference at the Helen Hunt Health Center Pharmacy in Old Town, Jennifer Crittenden ,M.S.W., shows off one of the new pre-paid mailers with which residents can get rid of unwanted or unneeded medicines. Crittenden, who works for the University of Maine's Center on Aging, is the program director for the new Safe Medicine Disposal for ME. Also on hand were Kathy Sykes (left) , a senior advisor for the Aging Initiative Office of the Administrator with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Lee Ohmart (not pictured), pharmacist at the Helen Hunt Health Center. (Bangor Daily News/John Clarke Russ) [Buy this photo](#)

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OLD TOWN, Maine - A cutting edge pilot program that's providing a safe way for residents to dispose of unwanted prescription drugs for free is working well, and is expected to be expanded statewide by fall, according to program officials.

"I'm just so impressed the more I learn about all the details of the program," Kathy Sykes, senior adviser of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Aging Initiative in Washington, D.C., said Wednesday during a site visit at the Helen Hunt Health Center Pharmacy in Old Town.

The project has been in the planning stages for several years, but Maine recently beat out several other states for EPA grant funding to become the first state in the country to launch what's been named the Safe Medicine Disposal for ME program.

The idea behind the effort, which is funded by a \$150,000 pilot grant, is to help keep medications out of rivers, streams and groundwater.

"We have been telling people for decades to just flush it down the toilet," Helen Hunt Health Center Pharmacist Lee Ohmart said Wednesday. "As it turns out, that's the wrong thing to do because it's showing up in the groundwater."

Traces of prescription medications that have been thrown away or flushed down toilets are being found in rivers, streams and other water bodies causing concern about the possible consequences to wildlife and human health. If unused or expired medications aren't disposed of properly, there's also the potential that they could get into the hands of children, or stolen.

Many drugs don't break down into harmless substances, Len Kaye, director of the UM Center on Aging and member of the Maine Benzodiazepine Study Group, explained in a recent UM press release.

The study group formed several years ago to address the disposal of unwanted drugs.

The free mail-back program launched this summer is an attempt to curb that problem, and includes the Center on Aging in conjunction with 18 partners, including the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency, the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, the U.S. Postal Service, area pharmacies, and numerous medical organizations.

So far, 35 packets of unwanted or unneeded medicines already have been mailed to the MDEA's Westbrook post office box.

"The program is just getting under way. It's the first week or so of implementation," Kaye stated in the release. "The public needs to know envelopes remain available, 1,800 in all."

Self-addressed drug mail-back envelopes are available for consumers at 11 pharmacies in four counties, Penobscot, Kennebec, Cumberland and Aroostook. As phase two of the program gets under way in the near future, 7,200 more envelopes will be distributed to additional participating pharmacies throughout the state. Proper disposal of medications is a problem for everyone, but the pilot program is focusing on people ages 65 and over since they most commonly need to dispose of drugs.

Although no specific cost-savings has been linked to the program, Ohmart said there likely would be savings in health care expenditures if doctors knew which prescriptions weren't being used in their entirety, and prescribed smaller amounts with the possibility of refills.

Sykes added that keeping medications out of groundwater where it already has shown to adversely impact wildlife is priceless.

The self-addressed, prepaid envelopes that can be picked up at participating pharmacies contain information on how to package the medication; fill out a confidential survey that will be used to provide information about what type of drugs are being mailed, how much was left over from the prescribed amount, and why they weren't used; and the phone number to call once the package has been mailed to ensure that law enforcement officials know it's on its way and that the medication arrives safely.

The drugs eventually will be incinerated, which is the only reliable way to dispose of them, according to Sykes.

Once results from the survey and pilot program have been gathered, the project is expected to expand statewide using state funds.

"I'm very impressed with what I've seen," Sykes said. "It's an amazing endeavor."

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