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Maine Program Offers Mail-in Option For Unused Drugs

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December 29, 2008 *Reported By: Josie Huang*

As a pharmacist at a RiteAid in Portland, Jay Melanson is often asked by customers how to get rid of unwanted medication. Should they flush it down the toilet? Or toss it in the trash? The answer, says Melanson, is neither. Instead, he pulls out an envelope for them to put their drugs in.

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"A six-by-eleven envelope. No postage is due. You're welcome to as many as you need. You don't have to take the names off the bottles if you don't want to. You know, it's completely confidential, you can, if you want to scratch the names off, that's fine. But leave them in the bottles, don't just dump raw tablets ,and I don't think they prefer liquids. No liquids."

The envelope is pre-addressed to the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency which will later destroy the drugs in an incinerator. Melanson's pharmacy is one of the first in Maine to provide these envelopes as part of a pilot program. Now the program, one of the first of its kind in the country, is expanding from 11 pharmacies in four counties to about 100 pharmacies, hospices and other community organizations statewide. "It's win-win for everybody concerned," says Len Kaye, director of the Center on Aging at the University of Maine, which piloted the program.

"It's all about preventing accidental poisoning of children and grandchildren and pets in the household, also preventing intentional misuse by teenagers and adults, as well as theft by those who should never be getting their hands on drugs in the home in the first place. But at the same time, it responds to Maine's concern that we maintain a pristine environment, that our waters remain clean and our soil remains pure as well," Kaye says.

But the program is projected to run out of state and federal funding by the spring of 2011. So Kaye is throwing support behind a bill proposed by the Maine Department of Environmental Protection that would make the program permanent and turn to the drug industry for funding. The drug makers' lobby is opposed to the idea of paying for the disposal of unused medications. The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers Association, which is closed until after the New Year, has stated in the past that the program may actually create diversion opportunities.

"But one must also understand that medications are currently in the mail system now," says Roy McKinney, director of the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency. "They're predominantly coming from mail-order pharmacies to the consumer. So there's already a lot of medications in the mail system if you will. This just adds another level into the mail system."

McKinney says that agents track the coded envelopes and have not found diversion to be a problem. "There is a system by which the consumer can call into an 800-number and it's recorded that that mailers has been placed into the mail system. And then we look on the back end to see if indeed that shows up at the postal service for pick-up by MDEA."

Program coordinators say that nearly 1,000 mailers have been returned, representing tens of thousands of pills. The Rite Aide on Portland's Allen Avenue alone has given away more than 100 envelopes since it joined the effort in May, says pharmacist Jay Melanson. He says a few people have requested multiple mailers. "But it's rare that we give out more than three envelopes and it's mostly one, so it's been a lot of people."

To see where you can get an envelope, go to www.safemeddisposal.com. Program coordinators say delivering it is as easy as dropping it off in a mail box or handing it to a postal carrier.