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Mainers get more ways to discard unwanted pills

Rite Aid now provides return envelopes, and others collect hundreds of bottles for safe disposal.

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Pharmacist Jay Melanson has spent his career getting customers the pills, ointments and inhalers they need. Recently, he's been helping people get rid of them, too.

His pharmacy, the Rite Aid on Allen Avenue in Portland, is providing stamped envelopes so customers can send in unused, unwanted prescriptions to be destroyed.

It's part of a first-of-its-kind program to keep drugs from being tossed out or flushed down the toilet and getting into the environment. It also keeps pills out of the hands of experimental teens.

"It prevents the phenomenon of 'pharming' where you have these kids who go into their grandparents' medicine cabinet and start taking everything and anything," said Melanson, who has given away a dozen envelopes since the program began in mid-May.

Safe Medicine Disposal for ME, www.safemeddisposal.com, is believed to be the largest and most comprehensive program of its kind in the country. Unlike other similar programs, the Maine initiative accepts controlled substances such as OxyContin and Valium.

The program is focused on senior citizens and their caregivers, and is available at a dozen pharmacies in four counties. The Rite Aid pharmacies on Allen Avenue and in Scarborough are the only ones in Cumberland County.

However, the number of pharmacies is expected to more than double in the fall, when the program will be expanded to include stores throughout the state and the padded 7-by-11-inch envelopes become available to all age groups.

The program -- coordinated by the University of Maine Center on Aging in partnership with groups concerned about the environment and drug abuse -- is the latest in a growing number of options for Mainers who want to dispose of outdated drugs.

Another major effort is taking place in Sagadahoc County, where community organizations have coordinated drug disposal events twice a year since 2005. Friday marked the latest event: More than 300 people dropped off hundreds of pounds of drugs at four collection sites, a fire station and three senior centers.

The medication was then carted off to Mid Coast Hospital in Brunswick to be inventoried and eventually shipped off for incineration.

Marla Davis, the hospital's community health director and coordinator of the county program, said other regions of the state may follow suit.

"Some folks from Presque Isle, Norway and Androscoggin County have been observing what we do today," Davis said.

These "take-back" events show how much medication and money is going to waste.

This March, at a drug collection event organized for the past three years by the Maine Association of Psychiatric Physicians at the State House, more than \$11,000 worth of unused drugs were collected in just an hour.



"There is more interest in trying to dispose of medication safely than having a stockpile around for diversion" to illegal use, said Dr. Stevan Gressitt, a member of the psychiatric organization and the Maine Benzodiazepine Study Group, which works to raise awareness about the abuse of prescription drugs. Both groups helped to create the new drug disposal program.

Since the program began May 12, more than 60 envelopes have been mailed to a Westbrook post office box kept by the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency.




Once the agency collects enough medication, a pharmacist will help catalog what was received, said Len Kaye, director of the Center on Aging. That will give policymakers an idea of what types of drugs are going unused most often.

The program is funded by a \$150,000 grant from the federal Environmental Protection Agency. The state allocated another \$150,000 last year to expand the program.

Drug-collection programs are becoming popular because consumers are becoming more aware of the problems that unused drugs can cause.

"We live near a lake with a septic system, and eventually..."

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