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Raymond Communications' Recycling Policy News

Unused Drugs in Maine to be Mailed, Incinerated

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By Glenda C. Booth,

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A unique pilot program for people to mail in unused prescription and over-the-counter drugs for proper disposal will start in Maine this fall, a step toward a statewide program.

Under the pilot, people will pick up pre-paid mailers at participating pharmacies and send unwanted drugs to the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency. The DEA will then incinerate the pharmaceuticals. Now in the planning phase, the project is supported by Maine law enforcement and U. S. Postal Service officials. The pilot program is part of the Maine Unused Pharmaceutical Disposal Project approved by the state legislature in 2004.

“The importance of the pilot is that, for the first time, Maine residents will have a safe option for returning medications that are piling up their homes, that create safety hazards for their family and pose environmental risks when disposed of improperly,” said Jennifer Crittenden, Project Director, at the University of Maine’s Center on Aging.

Authorities generally agree that flushing drugs down the toilet or throwing them in the trash is unacceptable because the chemicals end up in water supplies and cause harm to fish, other marine life, and possibly humans. Scientists have linked drugs to abnormalities like feminized male fish. Some compounds in medicines can only be destroyed by incineration used for medical waste.

Advocates of proper disposal say that a collection system can also reduce thefts from home medicine cabinets by drug users and prevent accidental use by children, the elderly, and other vulnerable people.

Under the pilot, supported by a \$150,000 U. S. Environmental Protection Agency grant, Mainers are expected to dispose of 1.5 tons of unwanted medications, including narcotics, anti-depressants, cold medicines, antibacterial ointments, lotions, and cough syrup. The project also includes a public education campaign that will put 6,000 flyers in pharmacies in four counties and an inventory of drugs collected. Program managers say that the inventory may help medical providers cut down on prescribing excess drugs.

The details and start date for the statewide program are now being determined. The long-term program is expected to be similar to the pilot, using the mail-in model.

Several other states are implementing or investigating drug take back programs including Washington, California, and Oregon.

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