

Local agencies seeking leftover and expired medications

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MICHAEL SULLIVAN/The News-Review |

Seeking to cut back on crime, drug overdoses and waste, law enforcement and health agencies are encouraging Douglas County residents to turn in their leftover medications.

The campaign, spurred by a national nonprofit group, Product Stewardship Institute, asks people to drop off their unused or expired medications at one of six sites throughout the county. Authorities say it's a better alternative than flushing drugs down the toilet or tossing them in the trash.

The Boston-based nonprofit agency focuses on solving waste management problems caused by products with an expired shelf life.

Douglas County Sheriff's Office spokeswoman Andrea Zielinski said this newest campaign is

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about drawing attention to the dangers of expired over-the-counter medications and prescription drugs that have been allowed to accumulate.

People often don't think about throwing out leftover medications until a spouse or relative dies and leaves behind a stockpile of medications, she said.

The sheriff's office in 2011 installed a medications disposal box in its lobby after teaming with the Oregon High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, a state program founded in 1999 with a mission to reduce drug-related crime, violence and drug trafficking.

"(Drop-off boxes) help alleviate the drug abuse problem and prevent people from being the victims of burglaries or thefts," Zielinski said. "Most property crimes are drug-related."

She said consumers whose prescription painkillers are stolen cannot get a new prescription without first filing a police report. This helps prevent people from stocking up on painkillers.

Roseburg police Lt. Patrick Moore, who leads the Douglas Interagency Narcotics Team, said there were a string of medication thefts and robberies several years ago from Douglas County pharmacies and homes, especially in the central part of the county.

"My general thought is we do have a problem," he said.

About 70 to 75 percent of heroin users in the county started their addiction with prescription medications, Moore said. These percentages are based on interviews with known addicts, treatment programs and local law enforcement agencies, he said.

Moore said the most abused prescription drugs include oxycodone, hydrocodone, clonazepam, Vicodin and Percocet.

In the last 2½ years, 33 people in Douglas County have died from drug overdoses, roughly one person per month, he said. Of that number, 24 died from an opiate overdose — six from heroin and the rest from a prescription opiate. Additionally, 23 of those 33 people died from misuse of prescription medications, Moore said.

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Some of the overdose deaths were suicides; others were caused from mixing multiple drugs or drugs and alcohol, he added.

Unintentional overdoses from prescription opioids kill more Americans than cocaine and heroin combined, according to Karen Shapiro, the nonprofit group's senior associate for policy and programs.

"And, the Pacific Northwest ranks third in the nation for drug dependence and abuse," Shapiro said in a written statement.

She said these prescriptions often are left in medicine cabinets long past their expiration dates.

Winston police Chief Scott Gugel said his department has been collecting medications since about 2008.

Over the years, he said he's noticed people tend to stock up on painkillers.

"The problem is people having access to them, like children, or kids giving it to friends," he said. "It's been a problem for years."

He said the disposal units take away the risks of those prescription drugs being "grabbed up by kids or visitors to your house. The secondary benefit is that they aren't going into water sources."

When medicines are thrown in the garbage, poured down the sink or flushed down the toilet, they can enter waterways through landfills, septic systems or wastewater treatment plants.

Studies show that pharmaceuticals, like narcotics, hormones and antibiotics, have severe health consequences for fish and other marine life, Shapiro said in a written statement.

Zielinski said the sheriff's office cleans out its disposal box every couple of weeks and transports the medications to a facility near Salem for incineration.

"It's very environmentally friendly," she said. "We don't want it to leak into the waterways."

David Stevens, owner of Gordon's Pharmacy and Gifts in Canyonville, said his business also has been collecting leftover and expired over-the-counter medications for years.

He said it's important to keep medications out of Douglas County waterways and landfills. "It's part of our going green movement," he said.

The pharmacy pays a fee to ship the medications to a facility in Texas that disposes of them safely, Stevens said.

He said this most recent campaign has brought in more people, nearly tripling the usual volume of returned medications.

It's more difficult for rural Douglas County residents to dispose of medications properly because they have farther to travel, Zielinski said.

"South County has a problem with prescription drug abuse," she added.

Gugel agreed this latest campaign is geared toward South County and rural-area residents.

He said the Winston Police Department hasn't received more medications than usual, but still gets hundreds of pounds of medications throughout the year.

"We have to go three or four times a year. Each bin is about 80 pounds of pills. And, we take liquid medications," Gugel said.

"It's been a very popular program, very successful," he added.

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Gordon's pharmacy has been handing out prescription bags that read, "Got Leftover Medicine? Use This Bag To Bring Back Your Meds." Product Stewardship Institute received a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Utilities Service to purchase the bags. They also designed a 30-foot-long billboard and chose its location.

"It's gotten a lot of people thinking about it," Stevens said. "I wish more pharmacies would do this."

The billboard, which sat on Old Highway 99 South in Winston, also attracted attention with the slogan "Got Leftover Meds? Don't Flush Them!"

Both the billboard and bags were used through the end of August. Other ways of spreading the word, such as fliers, will be distributed throughout the end of the year.

Stevens said he thinks if more pharmacies collect leftover medications, fewer tax dollars would be spent by local law enforcement agencies paying disposal fees.

The Reedsport, Sutherlin and Myrtle Creek police departments also collect prescription and over-the-counter medications.

Drop sites, which are open during business hours, are free and anonymous. All except for Gordon's pharmacy accept controlled substances such as Percocet, Vicodin and Xanax.

The law enforcement agencies accept medications in any form, including pet medication.

Medications should be left in their original containers, tightly sealed and secured in a sealed plastic bag to prevent leakage and contamination. People should remove or black out their personal information from the prescription labels.

Needles, thermometers, hydrogen peroxide, aerosol cans and inhalers are prohibited. The sheriff's office is also unable to accept medications from clinics, nursing homes or businesses.

"We don't care what you put in there. We just want you to dispose of it properly," Zielinski said.

She said if people are unable to take medications to a drop-off site, they should put the medications in cat litter or coffee grounds, because that helps leach out some of the toxins.

The National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day is Sept. 27.

- Reporter Jessica Prokop can be reached at 541-957-4209 and jprokop@nrtoday.com.