
Pharmacies next front for drug collection programs

By Amy Neff Roth

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Customers can pick up new prescriptions and drop off old ones at U&I Pharmacy in Vernon.

The pharmacy has a locked collection box for leftover, expired and otherwise unwanted medications. It was installed last year as part of a pilot program by the Product Stewardship Institute and the New York Product Stewardship Council in Oneida and Lewis counties. The pilot also included Garro's Pharmacy in Utica and three pharmacies in Lewis County, two of which have continued the program.

"It just seemed like a no-brainer," said U&I owner Ed Ballou. "Initially it didn't cost anything. And now it's not all that much.

He just pays for a company to collect the drugs and prints up flyers, he said.

"It's worth it in the long run, both because you know you're helping people get rid of these medicines and, to a small degree, you get a little extra foot traffic," Ballou said.

The bottles of unused medications filling up America's medicine cabinets have become a big source of concern to policymakers due to the risk of diversion to drug users and for the environmental risks they pose if disposed of improperly. The federal Drug Enforcement Administration sponsors two take-back days each year at locations across the country.

And a number of law-enforcement agencies in Oneida County have permanent collection boxes.

Pharmacies have become the latest focus of efforts to increase take-back programs. And a bill passed by the state Legislature — but not yet signed by the governor — would require all chain pharmacies to start collection programs.

Asked for a comment on the bill, Chris Krese, spokesman for the National Association of Chain Drug Stores, responded, "We are in ongoing discussions with governmental leaders regarding the specifics of the bill and its potential implementation."

And the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation is launching a pilot program at pharmacies, hospitals and long-term care facilities that will cover the cost of purchasing a collection box for medications as well as pickup and destruction costs for two years. So far, 52 pharmacies — most of them independents — have been selected for the program, but applications still are being accepted.

As the opioid crisis has grown, many warnings have gone out about the risk of drugs left in medicine cabinets being stolen for misuse or resale, which is why law enforcement has taken up this cause.

But the old advice to flush unwanted medications poses a lot of environmental risks, environmental advocates say.

"Most Americans have at least one pharmaceutical drug that they take and, unfortunately, it's not always convenient to dispose of these drugs properly so they flush them down the drain," said Liz Moran, water and natural resources associate for Environmental Advocates of New York. "The problem is that can have a significant consequence for the environment and public health."

Medications are designed to cause biological reactions, which can affect wildlife, she said. Xanax, for example, can affect the fight-or-flight instinct that keeps prey alive, Moran said.

"It's been shown that the chemicals that are in certain pharmaceutical drugs have been detected and actually changed the behavior of fish in rivers and streams," Moran said.

And throwing out medications still leads to the same consequences as they dissolve and make their way into water supplies, she said.

Wastewater treatment plants aren't designed to remove these chemicals, Moran said. She called for more rigorous testing of water in treatment facilities and even for annual testing of fish, similar to what the state does now for mercury levels.

"Unfortunately, we don't know all the impacts that pharmaceutical drugs in our water can have on our public health," she said, "but that's exactly what makes it so scary."

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