

Opinion: Safe and Convenient Medicine Collection is Good Medicine for LA County

By Heidi Sanborn
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Preventing prescription drug abuse and protecting water quality are two issues on the minds of Los Angeles County residents, but there may be only one policy approach that can address both at the same time: ensuring safe medicine collection opportunities are available, free and convenient throughout the county.

When people cannot find a convenient place to bring unwanted medications for disposal, they often flush them. Currently, it is estimated that 40 percent of leftover medications go unused and some being flushed, which contributes to pharmaceuticals in the water. A few decades ago, the government told people to flush medications. But lately, sanitation agencies including Los Angeles County say that medications are a “Contaminant of Emerging Concern” and the water treatment processes cannot remove all the medications so they advise “[No Drugs Down the Drain.](#)”



However, there is a real disconnect between the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and other federal agencies about the proper way of disposing unused medications, which led to more than 100 environmental and health organizations, agencies, activists and even state legislators sending [a letter](#) to FDA Commissioner Stephen Ostroff urging the FDA to end its “flush list.” The group, which included Los Angeles area supporters such as Paul Koretz, LA City Councilmember, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr, resident and member of the Waterkeeper Alliance, the Los Angeles County Solid Waste Management Committee and Save Our Shores, among many others, suggested creating and promoting a single disposal guidance system such as a secure medicine take-back program. The coalition also encouraged the FDA to work more closely with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy to develop clear and consistent guidelines for consumers regarding the safe disposal of leftover household medications.

Concurrently, a movement that started in California is spreading to the rest of the nation to ensure unused medications are properly disposed of in an effort to keep them out of the hands of children and out of our waterways.

In July of 2012, [Alameda County adopted the first ordinance in the nation](#) to hold pharmaceutical companies responsible for the safe collection and disposal of unused medications from the public. This is not unusual as drug companies design and pay for the medicine collection programs in Mexico, Canada and most of Europe. The U.S. pharmaceutical industry fought the disposal ordinance all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The U.S. Supreme Court decided not to hear the case in May 2015, which paved the way for other counties such as San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Marin, and Santa Cruz to adopt similar ordinances.

And now, Los Angeles County is tackling this issue. The County has drafted an ordinance that will allow residents to safely dispose medications and needles for free. This new program will help prevent unused medications from entering the environment, reduce their availability for drug abuse and misuse, and reduce injuries associated with sharps. The County is set to hear this ordinance on March 29, 2016 and has [a website](#) for more information. The

public also is encouraged to share their stories about any problems they've encountered disposing medicines or needles.

I am confident that by working together in public/private partnership we can put a stop to unused medications being flushed into our waterways and greatly reduce access to those who would abuse these medications. A safe medication and needle take back program is a proven solution. In fact, [Walgreens just announced](#) they would be the first national pharmacy retail chain in the U.S. to put safe medicine collection bins in 500 of their stores starting in California.

Walgreens recent actions are a great first step and I am hopeful more retailers will follow suit. I also hope that the public will participate in this important policy discussion to determine whether we will soon have free and convenient medicine and needle disposal throughout the County. Safe medicine disposal is good medicine for LA County!

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