

# Walgreens expands drug take-back program

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Paul Swiech pswiech@pantagraph.com



BLOOMINGTON — The newest weapon in the battle against prescription opioid abuse and misuse of other medicines is an unassuming bin in an increasing number of pharmacies.

Walgreens, with several partners, announced Monday it is expanding its number of safe medication disposal kiosks nationwide from 600 to 1,500.

In Illinois, the number is increasing by 40, meaning there will be more than 80 kiosks at Walgreens pharmacies where people can safely and anonymously drop off unused and no-longer-needed medicines, including prescription opioids, said Marcel Naddaf, Walgreens regional healthcare director.

Naddaf made the announcement in front of the kiosk at the 24/7 pharmacy in Walgreens at 1525 N. Veterans Parkway, Bloomington. The five other Walgreens stores in B-N do not currently have kiosks.

Since Walgreens opened its first kiosk in spring 2016, the pharmacy has collected more than 155 tons of unwanted medications from 600 kiosks in 45 states and the District of Columbia, Naddaf said.

"This tells us that there is a demand for a safe and convenient way to dispose of medications

and we are excited and proud to expand this program with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois, Amerisource Bergen, Pfizer and Prime Therapeutics," he said. "We need to make the safe disposal of medication easier and the expansion of the kiosks does that."

Walgreens and its partners were joined at the announcement by U.S. Rep. Darin LaHood, R-Dunlap, a member of the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee, whose health subcommittee had a hearing last week on the opioid crisis.

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"This is a small step but a very significant step," LaHood said of the increasing number of kiosks and their role in combating the opioid epidemic.

LaHood noted that misuse of opioids transcends all socio-economic boundaries. Some people who become addicted to prescription opioid painkillers move on to illegal heroin when they can no longer get their prescriptions filled.

"This is something where we need all hands on deck," said LaHood, noting that the two-year budget bill passed by Congress last week includes \$6 billion to combat the opioid epidemic by increasing allocations to drug treatment and rehabilitation facilities and to law enforcement to slow the flow of drugs; to reduce over-prescription of opioid painkillers; and for Narcan, which can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose.

"This is a bipartisan issue," said Julie Cantor-Weinberg of Prime Therapeutics, which provides pharmacy benefits, noting that only 27 percent of the public has used drug take-back programs so far.

"We are encouraged by our combined efforts," she said of Monday's announcement.

Peter Rankaitis, executive director of Project Oz, whose programs include drug use prevention, told The Pantagraph later, "The more places that take unused medications to keep them out of the hands of people who aren't prescribed them and to keep them out of the water supply, the better."

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