

## Used drug collection a success

By Lydia Statz, Union staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, April 22, 2014 9:02 am

JEFFERSON — What do you do with the old medications sitting in your bathroom cabinet? When you notice a bottle of cold medicine at the back of the shelf is expired, do you just toss it in the trash ... or do you flush it down the toilet?

Since 2007, Jefferson County has allowed residents to dispose of their unused medications through Clean Sweep. The program, which collects hazardous materials from area residents several times a year and disposes of them safely, includes collection boxes at law enforcement agencies countywide in which residents may deposit, anonymously, prescription or over-the-counter drugs for proper disposal.

In just seven years, the county has taken in almost 10,000 pounds of pharmaceuticals, with more than 3,000 pounds of that being federally controlled substances.

All of this is good news, particularly as the nation celebrates the 44th annual Earth Day today.

For years, Americans were told to flush their unused or expired medications down the toilet for disposal. There were good intentions behind this: Medications left in the trash can unintentionally poison young children or animals, or can be found by those looking to abuse the more potent controlled substances.

However, recent studies have shown that medications flushed down the toilet or washed down the drain can pass through wastewater treatment plants and into rivers, lakes and streams.

A 2008 Associated Press study found traces of prescription medications in the drinking water of 41 million Americans. New research from 2013 found contaminants in Lake Michigan, from which the City of Milwaukee draws its drinking water.

Nobody knows exactly what kind of effect these contaminants have on our bodies, but the findings have been alarming enough to spur a growth in drug take-back programs across the country.

Jefferson County's effort began after Jefferson County Supervisor Steve Nass heard a radio ad for Milwaukee's drug-disposal program, and thought it would be a good idea to start something similar back at home.

"It's actually one of the fastest things we ever jumped on board with as a group, I think, countywide," said Jefferson County Sheriff Paul Milbrath.

The county already had a well-established Clean Sweep program, so for a few years, officials simply allowed participants to bring their unwanted medications along with household chemicals to those events. Sheriff Milbrath said that program worked well, but before long, the county started talking about having permanent dropboxes around the county.

“To be honest with you, I agreed to do it with the box because I thought it would, kind of after six months, die out — that nobody would have enough drugs anymore to bring in. But we fill that bin up every week, and not just us,” he said.

Dropboxes at the Whitewater, Watertown, Lake Mills and Fort Atkinson police departments also fill up regularly.

Last year, more than 1,300 pounds of non-controlled substances were collected, while 1,100 pounds of controlled prescriptions were collected, making it the program’s second highest year yet, just falling short of 2012.

But what happens to all of those drugs so dutifully brought to the police department and dropped into the collection bin?

Several times a year, area pharmacists, law enforcement agents and a few volunteers sort through the hundreds of pounds of drugs that have collected in the sheriff’s office evidence room, separating the federally controlled substances from the rest.

Those that are not controlled — such as over-the-counter medications, antibiotics, eyedrops and anything else that isn’t on the federal government’s “schedule” of controlled drugs — are consolidated into giant barrels to be incinerated with other hazardous chemicals collected at the Clean Sweep event.

Drugs that are controlled, however, are separated and stored until later in the year, when they can be disposed of during a single “witnessed burn.” Taking place annually, usually in November, Milbrath escorts several-hundred pounds of pharmaceuticals to Sauget, Ill., to be incinerated according to Federal Drug Enforcement Agency regulations.

“He has to accompany it there, and he actually has to watch the drugs being put into a pit, and it’s all mixed with other things,” said Sharon Ehrhardt, head of the Jefferson County’s solid-waste program. “And there are all sorts of regulations and guards. He has to actually watch it when it’s dumped into that pit, but he doesn’t have to stay for the burn.”

That system, which has worked well for the county for several years, might be about to change. The DEA recently rewrote its standards, tightening several regulations and possibly putting the program in jeopardy.

Ehrhardt said that among the proposed changes, which have not been finalized yet, is that only law enforcement officers would be able to handle the pharmaceuticals, which would have to be destroyed within a quick turnaround time. Not allowing pharmacists and volunteers to be involved would make it burdensome for compliance, not to mention too costly for the county to fund in the future.

“It depends upon how those regulations come out as to whether or not we can sustain the program. It depends whether they’ll allow the program to go on as it is, or if we’ll have to add more security,” Ehrhardt explained.

“If they publish (to proposed rules) as is, we will have to re-evaluate our program, which would really be sad, because the residents have really taken to this program.”

Ending Jefferson County’s program, which has become a model for other counties across the state due to its success, would be a disappointment because of another major benefit it provides to the community, as well.

Milbrath said his first thought upon beginning the program was not to make the county more “green,” but, rather, to help take more drugs off the streets.

“Sharon came from that angle of the environmental benefits, and coming from drugs (enforcement background) for 14 years, I just thought, ‘Wow, that would be a great way to get rid of these.’” he said. “So getting those off the street and interrupting the supply chain, it really has benefitted us.”

For more information on the drug drop-off program, visit [www.jeffersoncountywi.gov](http://www.jeffersoncountywi.gov) or call (920)-674-7430.