

# NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

**Resolution Adopted July 28, 2009**

## **Resolution in Support of a Safe, Convenient Medicine Return Program**

**Issue:** Safe disposal of unwanted medicines from households.

**Proposed policy:** NACo supports maximizing the collection and safe disposal of unwanted prescription and over-the-counter medicines through an internalized pharmaceutical manufacturer financing mechanism that covers the cost of collection, transportation, and hazardous waste disposal, and does not rely on state and local government funding.

**Background:** Communities across the country are struggling to implement and finance programs to address the public safety impacts of leftover medicines in resident's homes and the environmental impacts of improper disposal of unwanted medicines.

Storage of unwanted medicines in the home can result in accidental poisonings and increase opportunities for drug abuse and unsafe diversion of prescription drugs. Abuse of prescription pain killers ranks second, only behind marijuana, as the Nation's most prevalent illegal drug problem. The Office of National Drug Control Policy reports that one third of all new abusers of prescription drugs in 2006 were 12 to 17 year olds; and prescription drugs are now the drug of choice among 12 to 13 year olds. The majority of teens who abuse prescription drugs get them easily and for free, primarily from friends and relatives, often without their knowledge. Unintentional poisoning is now the second leading cause of unintentional injury death for Americans, with 23,618 deaths in 2005. Of these, approximately 95% were due to drug overdoses and more than half of these were associated with prescription drugs. Many counties are launching prescription drug task forces and public awareness campaigns to try to address these problems, but lack resources for collection and safe disposal of unwanted medicines.

Pharmaceuticals are also an emerging environmental contaminant that are detected in surface waters around the United States and in the drinking water of 24 major metropolitan areas affecting 41 million Americans. A substantial portion of pharmaceuticals and their metabolites may enter the environment by passing through human bodies; however, disposing of waste medicines by flushing into wastewater or disposal in the solid waste stream contributes to contamination. Unwanted medicines disposed to sanitary sewer systems are not completely treated by the wastewater treatment facilities, allowing pharmaceuticals to be released into the environment through effluent and biosolids. Unwanted medicines disposed to solid waste systems may end up in landfill leachate, which is often pumped to wastewater treatment facilities, eventually allowing pharmaceuticals to be released into the environment. Emerging wastewater treatment technologies to enhance removal of organic wastewater contaminants may be utilized in the future, but they are not yet refined and too expensive for most municipalities to consider. Eliminating the disposal of waste medicines into wastewater or the solid waste stream is a simple and critical source reduction approach to mitigating the impact of pharmaceuticals in the environment.

The number and volume of pharmaceuticals prescribed to U.S. residents has increased dramatically in the past decade. For example, Washington State residents now purchase an average of 9 prescriptions per year, resulting in greater accumulations in Washington State homes. Unused or unwanted quantities of prescription and over-the-counter medicines are projected to be substantial, with some studies estimating that between 30% and 80% of patients do not finish commonly prescribed medicines such as pain medicines, antibiotics, and beta blockers. A pilot medicine return project operating in Washington State since October of 2006 by Group Health Cooperative and Bartell Drugs has collected more than 20,000 pounds of unwanted household pharmaceuticals from just 37 sites in six counties, demonstrating the demand and feasibility of such a system.

Pharmaceutical manufacturers currently operate and fund successful unwanted medicine take-back systems in Canada and several countries in Europe. A similar financing system can be developed in the United States that effectively covers the cost of collection, transportation, and safe disposal of unwanted medicines without relying on local and state governments to pay these expenses.

**Fiscal/Urban/Rural Impact:** Passage of legislation to increase medically acceptable safe disposal of unwanted medicines will have positive impacts on human health and the environment, and should be conducted in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders through development of a cost-internalized pharmaceutical manufacturer financing mechanism that does not rely on government funding. Sustainable funding through product manufacturers to provide secure and convenient medicine return programs will relieve current and future fiscal burdens on county budgets and staff. Current costs of mitigating impacts of improper management of unwanted medicines include: providing related law enforcement staffing, operating poison control hotlines, providing coroner's office services, and operating wastewater treatment and drinking water facilities.

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