Introduction

The Get the Meds Out pharmaceutical waste mail-back program provided free envelopes for safe disposal of unwanted or expired medication under the guidance of the UW-Extension. This program was funded through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, under a Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) grant and ran from August 2011 to December 2011.

Get the Meds Out was available within the 36 Wisconsin counties that drain into the Great Lakes watershed. 328 individual locations, including pharmacies, police stations, and hospices, participated in the program (see Figure 1). Goals of the program included addressing the high rate of prescription pill drug abuse in Wisconsin and reducing the potential negative environmental effects of drugs in the Great Lakes.

UW-Extension formed several partnerships integral to the success of Get the Meds Out. Wisconsin's program followed the guidelines of an already existing mail-back program being run through the University of Maine Center on Aging’ Safe Medicine Disposal for ME Program. Partnership with Maine allowed Get the Meds Out to collect controlled substances by mail and safely dispose of them through the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency (Maine DEA).

Other partnerships included the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Product Stewardship Institute, The HOPE of Wisconsin, State of Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant, and Associated Recyclers of Wisconsin.

How did Get the Meds Out work?

Get the Meds Out provided free, pre-paid mail-back envelopes to any interested pharmacy, clinic, health department, senior center or police department within the targeted 36 counties. Each participating facility received a box of 25 envelopes to start and requested more when needed. Facilities were responsible for giving out the envelopes free-of-charge to their customers or clients upon request. The individual would then take the envelope home, follow the instructions to fill it with their unwanted medications, take a short survey, and drop the sealed envelope
into a regular mailbox. The envelopes were addressed to the Maine DEA, where they were sorted and sent for safe disposal.

The process was designed to be as simple and convenient as possible to ensure significant results. Those individuals who were unable to pick up an envelope themselves had the option to call and request one over the phone.

Summary of Results

- As of March 8, 2012, the Get the Meds Out program has received 5,066 envelopes with a total weight of 2,632.7 pounds of pharmaceuticals collected.
- The city with the highest frequency of return was Rhinelander (4.87%), followed by Oconomowoc (2.81%), New Berlin (2.57%), and Woodruff (2.18%) (see Figure 2).
- According to participant survey data, nearly 50% of program users would have flushed or thrown their medicines into the trash. This means that approximately 1,300 pounds of medicines were prevented from entering Wisconsin waters and soil.
- At last count, 333.6 pounds (12.7%) of the total drugs collected were identified as controlled substances.

University of Maine pharmacy students sampled 10% for the returned envelopes and analyzed their contents. Based upon this assessment, they found:
- The majority of drugs returned were generic (71.5%), vs. brand name (27.2%). (See Figure 3)
Analysis of prescription size indicated that as much as 68-80% of the medications collected were wasted or unused when they were returned. The top three classes of drugs returned were CNS agents, cardiovascular agents, and psychotherapeutic agents. (See Figure 4)

Get the Meds Out Participants

The age range of Get the Meds Out participants was 18 – 100, with an average of 61 years old. The majority of users said they were disposing of their own medication (70%), as compared to participants who disposed of medications for a relative, friend, or pet. Most participants were female (61%).

Responses varied greatly when participants were asked why they wanted to get rid of the medications. Almost the same amount of people answered, “Doctor told me to stop taking the medicine” (36%), as “Doctor gave me new medicine to take instead” (35%).

Participants noted “convenience” as their primary reason for choosing a mail-back program, followed closely by “free to use.” Both of these reasons consistently prove to be necessary components of a successful pharmaceutical collection program. Almost all (99%) of the participants responded that this program was “useful” or “very useful.”

Conclusions

Although the Get the Meds Out program officially ended in December 2011, the Maine DEA continues to receive residual envelopes from Wisconsin. According
to data collected from the program survey, an overwhelming percentage of participants (86%) listed “Best for the environment” as the most important reason for using a mail-back envelope. This indicates the desire of Wisconsin residents to have an environmentally safe method of medication disposal.

The amount of envelope returns based on location was as expected, with a few surprises. The largest concentration of locations to pick up envelopes was in the City of Milwaukee (30), followed by Waukesha (12), and Rhinelander (8). However, the highest return frequency came from Rhinelander. While it is unclear exactly why this happened, it may be attributed to the following:

- a high level of employee involvement at the Rhinelander locations
- Involvement of local county Extension agents in promotion and outreach and
- Additional opportunities for envelope distribution at health fairs or other events.

Nearly 13% of the total drugs collected to date were identified as controlled substances. Finding collection and disposal options for controlled substances can be problematic due to restrictions of the Controlled Substances Act. Get the Meds Out provided a safe, legal, and convenient method of disposal of controlled substances.

The Get the Meds Out program successfully prevented a large quantity of pharmaceuticals from entering Wisconsin’s environment. Through outreach efforts and a high level of participation from our locations, this program was able to educate people about safe medicine collection within all 36 targeted counties and beyond. As was expected, the Maine DEA received envelopes from several counties outside of the original 36. Over the course of the program, many requests were made to extend Get the Meds Out throughout the state.

Comments about the program were mostly positive. Suggestions for how to improve the program in the future included the following: provide a variety of different sized envelopes, advertise more, extend the program to the entire state of Wisconsin, and include collection of sharps.

Resources: