

Personal dilemma may inspire U.S. water fix: Drug dropboxes

By **Martha Mendoza, Associated Press**; 15 September 2008

DALY CITY, Calif. — When her father died in 2004, Adrienne Tissier faced the sad task of cleaning out his belongings — clothes, furniture, bags of medication. The drugs, including painkillers and sedatives, prompted a tricky question: Where to toss them?

Tissier, who was aware of the impact pharmaceuticals can have on the environment, checked with local authorities.

"No one seemed to know. They didn't have much to offer," said Tissier. "You'd think tossing out medicines would be pretty straightforward, but it's not." Tissier was in a position to do something: She was a newly elected member of the board of supervisors of San Mateo County, just south of San Francisco.

She began calling meetings. With her staff, Tissier talked to the Drug Enforcement Administration and local law enforcement. They talked to the Environmental Protection Agency and local environmental officials. They talked to pharmacists and medical authorities.

And they tried to figure out what other communities were doing about this.

"Not much," was Tissier's conclusion.

The biggest challenge, she found, is a federal law that prohibits anyone from receiving a narcotic or other controlled substance from someone else. Anyone, that is, except a law enforcement agent.

Tissier approached local police and found they wanted to help, in part because local teens were consuming handfuls of whatever pills they could find at "pharma parties."

It's a growing problem. A study in Florida found that deaths caused by prescription drugs were three times the number caused by illegal drugs in that state last year.

In California, Tissier had a solution: a dozen white, metal pharmaceutical drop boxes — starting with three refurbished postal collection boxes — were placed outside police and sheriff departments around the county.

The results have been stunning.

In the first year, more than two tons of medications were dropped off. The costs have been less than \$7,000, including hauling the drugs to a nearby medical waste disposal company that ships them to out-of-state incinerators specially designed for pharmaceutical waste.

"It's one of those things that seems so simple but it really can make a difference," Tissier said, standing outside the Daly City Police Department, where a property officer was removing bags of drugs from a drop box.

There have been dozens of drug drop-off and collection programs across the U.S., though few have lasted more than several months because of limited funds.

In 2006, a one-day drug return program at 25 locations in Chicago netted 1,600 pounds of medications — some more than 50 years old. Separate one-day takeback programs in Michigan and Milwaukee last year each yielded more than a ton of medicine.

About 101,300 pills were returned, mostly to San Francisco Bay-area pharmacies, during the last seven months of 2007 through the Green Pharmacy Program of Teleosis Institute in Berkeley, a program report says. Half of the pills originally sold were returned — a surprisingly big share, but one in line with predictions of some health professionals.

Chances are, many of those pills would have ended up in the sewers.

In Washington state, where a pilot program that collected 9,000 pounds of medications is running out of funding, Rep. Dawn Morrell, a registered nurse, has introduced a law that would require drug companies to design and fund a takeback program. She points out that these same companies spend more than \$1 billion a year marketing their medicines in her state.

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