Statewide Medicine Take-Back Bill Fails to Pass State Senate

Local News

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Olympia, WA – On Monday March 7, the Washington State Senate failed to vote on and pass Substitute Senate Bill 5234, the Secure Medicine Take-Back Bill. The proposed legislation would have required drug manufacturers selling medicines in Washington state to provide and finance a secure take-back and disposal program for left-over or expired medicines from residents. Over 140 organizations statewide supported the proposed legislation, including sheriffs, public health leaders, substance abuse professionals, and water quality experts. “While many Senators were strongly in favor of this bill, pressure from the pharmaceutical industry managed to derail a good piece of legislation that would help protect our families and the environment from left-over medicines. It’s unfortunate that common sense and innovation were left on the sidelines in favor of backroom politics. Washington desperately needs a secure system to safely dispose of leftover medicines from homes without hurting the environment. It’s time to put our families first, not the pharmaceutical companies,” said Karen Bowman, RN, Washington State Nurses Association.

In Washington state alone, about 33 million containers of prescription and over-the-counter drugs are left unused, many finding their way into the mouths of children. There’s been an alarming increase in accidental poisonings and teen drug abuse in the last decade - every fifteen minutes a child under 4 will overdose on drugs found at home. Unused pharmaceuticals that are disposed of are often done so improperly—either by flushing medicines down the toilet or throwing them in the trash, which subsequently end up in our region’s waterways. Disposing of medicines in the trash simply passes the problem onto future generations as our landfills are not designed to handle this toxic waste. The legislation provided a safe and convenient way for Washington residents to dispose of unwanted and unused prescription and over-the-counter medications before they either end up in the wrong hands or end up contaminating drinking water. “The irony is that our neighbors to the north in British Columbia have a take-back program, run and paid for by drug manufacturers, which safely collected over 133,000 pounds of medicines last year. Don’t Washington families deserve the same protection? A penny or two per container is worth the cost, especially when we are talking about children’s lives” said Margaret Shield, Policy Liaison, Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County. According to Sheriffs and police departments supporting this legislation across the State, there’s a clear and urgent need for this program. Thousands of pounds of unwanted medicines are collected each year by law enforcement, but they are running out of funding to keep these programs going. “We’ve collected over a thousand pounds last year and there’s even more out there, but our budget is being cut further and it’s unlikely we can keep this going with current funding issues,” said Thurston County Undersheriff Jim Chamberlain. The legislation would have required drug companies to dedicate less than 1 cent for every $16 in medicines sold to implement a safe take-back program for unused medications. In Washington State, total revenues for prescription and over-the-counter medicines exceed $4 billion annually. Take back programs only exist in a small number of counties in Washington and are paid for by those communities. Substitute Senate Bill 5234 would have relieved a financial burden on

law enforcement agencies and local governments who are already struggling with declining budgets. **About Take Back Your Meds Take Back Your Meds** is a group of health organizations, police, drugstores, local governments, environmental groups, and others in Washington State who support medicine take-back programs to reduce access to highly-addictive drugs, reduce the risk of poisonings, and reduce environmental contamination. **These organizations support legislation to create a secure, statewide medicine return program for unwanted medicines from households that is financed by pharmaceutical manufacturers, and that does not rely on state and local government funding. For a full listing of supporting organizations and more information about the safe disposal of pharmaceuticals, visit http://www.TakeBackYourMeds.org.**