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Mass. needs to take the lead with drug disposal

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When we were teenagers, drug abuse meant an addiction to marijuana, cocaine or heroin. Today, more Americans die each year from overdoses involving prescription pain relievers than from heroin and cocaine combined, and the rate of opioid deaths exceeds that from car accidents.

In Massachusetts, there were 1,379 unintentional opioid overdose deaths in 2015, a 51 percent increase from 2013. To help address this epidemic, Massachusetts passed the first state law in the country requiring pharmaceutical companies to fund and manage the safe disposal of leftover medications as part of a comprehensive substance abuse prevention bill signed by Gov. Charlie Baker in March. While an impressive step in the right direction, this law might inadvertently allow pharmaceutical companies to skirt their legal obligation to dispose of medications in the safest, most convenient manner for the public.

Each year, over \$1 billion worth of leftover drugs are thrown in the trash, flushed, or relegated to medicine cabinets. Drug take-back programs — collection receptacles and mail-back envelopes — provide residents with a convenient way to safely dispose of unwanted and expired medications. Removing unwanted prescription drugs from the home reduces their availability to addicts, curious teens, innocent children, and pets. These programs also prevent medicines from being thrown in the garbage or down a drain, where they enter the environment and can contaminate our waterways.

The Massachusetts law allows pharmaceutical manufacturers to comply by providing any two of the following four disposal options: collection receptacles at police stations, pharmacies, or other authorized locations; mail-back envelopes; periodic “drop off day” events; or disposal at home via approved methods.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health regulations, which are currently being developed for the new law, should prioritize industry-funded drug take-back solutions to ensure that leftover medications are disposed of effectively once the program begins in January. Unfortunately, while most federal, state and local government agencies strongly promote drug takeback receptacles, the pharmaceutical industry promotes home-garbage disposal after mixing with kitty litter, or the use of products that claim to deactivate pharmaceutical compounds.

The regulations developed by DPH should incentivize companies to accept their responsibility and not off load it onto the state.

Massachusetts has the opportunity to develop the safest, most convenient drug-disposal program in the nation. Drug companies have a unique opportunity to show the public that they will be partners in addressing this tragic epidemic, saving lives and strengthening communities.

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