Drug Repository Program

Drug recycling lags despite '02 Ohio law
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It was the worst day of Garry Beltz's life when his wife, Karon, died of breast cancer in 1999.

Shortly after her death, Beltz had $6,700 worth of prescription drugs that could help someone else, maybe hold off death a little longer.

He was told they had to be thrown away.

"These drugs were new, still sealed, never opened," said Beltz, 63, of Green. "One pill cost $49, another $79. A vial of a liquid medication cost $160. She had to take one vial a day. I know people too poor to ever afford these drugs and I held them in my hand. And I was told they would have to be destroyed.

"First I was shocked," he said. "Then I got angry."

It was out of Garry Beltz's anger that the Ohio General Assembly eventually passed "Karon's Law," named in memory of his late wife. The law allows nursing homes and wholesale pharmaceutical companies to donate unused medicine for redistribution to the poor.

In 2002, Ohio was the first state in the nation to adopt the law.

Since then, 18 other states have adopted similar legislation. Most of the states put their laws into practice before Ohio's took effect in April 2004.

And many of them are having more success than Ohio.

State Sen. Kirk Schuring, a Massillon Republican, and the man who introduced the legislation, is confounded by the lack of nursing-home participation in Ohio.

He said the North Carolina Pharmacy Board reported the recycling of $5 million to $6 million worth of drugs each year.

The Ohio Pharmacy Board and the Ohio Department of Health both endorse the bill and have sent letters to nursing homes and pharmaceutical companies asking them to participate.

"There is always fear of liability," said Schuring. "That's why the law has built right into it that those who participate in the program will not be held liable, criminally or civilly, if there are any problems - as long as there was no intentional tampering with the drugs."

Despite the safeguards, only four nursing homes near Sandusky and two near Massillon are participating in the program. The Sandusky operation is still getting started.

In Massillon, Diane Daniels, chief executive of the Western Stark Medical Clinic, said her free clinic distributes about $8,000 a week worth of life-saving drugs to people who could otherwise not afford them.

They include drugs for heart disease, high blood pressure, Alzheimer's, diabetes and many other common ailments. The drugs come from the Rose Lane nursing home in Massillon and ManorCare-Belden Village of Canton.
"Our people have to choose between rent, heat, food and medicine," Daniels said. "They often go without medicine and end up in the emergency room. And here you have this perfectly good medicine going to waste.

"It's sad, and there is no reason for it. Almost all were paid for by Medicaid in the first place, so it is only fair that they be used."

Schuring agrees. In December he introduced a bill that would require nursing homes and commercial pharmaceutical firms to turn over unused medication.

"We never wanted to force them to do it, but clearly, making it voluntary is not working," he said. "If this law passes, they will have to do it."

In Sandusky, Susan Daugherty, director of Serving Our Seniors, is working with Buderer's Compounding Pharmacy to get a local program up and running.

"It breaks your heart to see these people so desperate for medicine and to know that [the drugs] are being incinerated," she said. "It costs thousands of dollars for commercial pharmacies, which provide large amount of medications to nursing homes, to destroy millions of dollars worth of pills. It's crazy."

Matthew Buderer has been collecting castoff medications for several weeks. When he gets enough, he will break down the packages and give the pills to needy Erie County residents, who will have an identification card provided by Serving Our Seniors.

"We'll charge $7.20 a prescription, which should be enough money to pay to have a full-time person break down the packages and separate the pills," he said. "I would like to see the senior citizens group in Lorain set up a program there. . . . Perhaps we could eventually provide the drugs to people from Huron and Lorain counties as well."

Buderer said the amount of drugs destroyed is staggering.

"One company told me that they destroy enough medication to fill a 6-foot-by-6-foot-by-6-foot trash container every single day," he said. "Imagine all the people that could use those drugs."

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