

Mississippi Sharps Program Reaches Milestone

Mississippi's Household Medical Sharps Collection and Disposal Program reached a milestone at the end of 2018 by surpassing 50,000 pounds of medical sharps collected from the public. Medical sharps include syringes, needles, lancets, and other sharp objects used by persons in their homes for self-treatment of health related issues such as diabetes. Before MDEQ implemented its voluntary program in 2009, there were few options for disposing of home-generated medical sharps other than to place them in household trash bags. The primary problem with that practice is that it exposed people in the waste collection and disposal business to dangerous needle stick injuries. Even though only a handful of other states were actively pursuing safer disposal options, the Mississippi State Legislature, with input from MDEQ and others, adopted laws that provided for a voluntary medical sharps collection program.

MDEQ took the charge from the Legislature and implemented a collection program that provided outlets across the state and that promoted a better understanding of the public for the need for proper sharps disposal. MDEQ approached pharmacies that sold medical sharps and requested their participation in the new program to collect used medical sharps from the public. Initially, about 80 pharmacies agreed to participate in the program. MDEQ rolled its program out to the public in September, 2009. The public was urged to drop off their used medical sharps free of cost at local pharmacy locations.

"We did not know how well the public would respond to this program, or if there would be problems that we had not anticipated," said Bill Barnett, an MDEQ staffer who helped design and implement the program. "I didn't really know what to expect, but in the first full year of implementation, I was pleasantly surprised that we had collected about 1,500 pounds of household medical sharps. That amount seemed like a lot to me in the first year, and I knew the program would grow."

And, indeed the program has grown. Every year, the program has grown in the number of public drop-off locations (consisting of local pharmacies and a number of municipal fire stations). At the end of 2018, the program had grown to 354 drop-off locations. Most locally-owned, independent pharmacies across the state are partners in the program, as well as most Walgreens and Fred's pharmacy stores. In fact, Mississippi now has more household medical sharps drop-off locations per capita than any other state in the nation. Only California, New York, and Wisconsin have a larger number of collection locations. As for the volumes collected, the program is now receiving used sharps at a rate of about 10,000 pounds per year.

"Never in my wildest expectations for this program, did I believe that we would one day be receiving 10,000 pounds of sharps in one year," says Barnett. "In 2018, we fell just short of that amount, but I'm sure that we will exceed that amount in 2019."

MDEQ reached its milestone figure of 50,000 pounds collected during the program's nine-year history in December of this past year. Barnett estimates that 50,000 pounds is equivalent to approximately 7.6 million syringes that were kept out of household trash bags.

MDEQ encourages Mississippi residents who generate medical sharps in their home through health care administered to family or to pets to properly containerize those sharps and drop off the containers at one of the collection locations. Information on the program and on where to find local sharps drop-off locations can be found at www.mdeq.ms.gov/medsharps.