

LA supervisors may study drug take-back ordinances. Again.



Photo by Jesse Moore via Flickr Creative Commons

Rebecca Plevin | November 21, 2016

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors is poised to take another stab at weighing the pros and cons of a mandatory take-back program for unused medications and old needles, lancets and other medical "sharps."

On Tuesday, the board will consider directing the departments of public health and public works to review the experiences of counties in California and elsewhere that require the drug industry to pay for the collection and disposal of unused medicines and sharps.

The motion, by Supervisors Mark Ridley-Thomas and Sheila Kuehl, would also ask county staff to get feedback from technical experts on a mandatory take-back ordinance the board shelved in June. The public health and public works departments would have four months to report back on their findings and make recommendations.

The proposed ordinance the board set aside would have required drug makers to design and pay for a system of drop-off points for medications and sharps. In the face of fierce resistance from the pharmaceutical industry, the supervisors voted instead to let drug firms set up a public education campaign and host quarterly take-back events.

Tuesday's motion comes three weeks after the county's interim health officer, Dr. Jeffrey Gunzenhauser, said the pharmaceutical industry failed to follow the board's guidance in establishing the take-back events and outreach effort.

Kuehl and Supervisor Hilda Solis voiced similar concerns about the drug makers' performance last month.

Ridley-Thomas said in a statement that county departments and the drug industry have debated the public health and environmental benefits of developing a take-back program for 18 months, and "our next step is to engage academic and scientific experts to weigh in and share relevant data to help guide the County's approach."

He noted that the public works department has raised concerns about the potential long-term impacts of drugs entering the water system, "but analysis thus far is inconclusive about the potential impacts."

Ridley-Thomas argued that it's unclear whether mandatory drug take-back programs prevent people from misusing prescription drugs and dying from drug-related deaths.

But Heidi Sanborn, who advocates for the implementation of drug take-back programs as executive director of the National Stewardship Action Council, said she's concerned Tuesday's motion could lead to "a rat hole of never-ending debate and study."

The pharmaceutical industry has already agreed in court that drugs are impacting groundwater and drinking water, she said. Sanborn called the plan the county set aside in June "the best ordinance in the country right now, by far."

Five Northern California counties require drug makers to pay for the collection and disposal of unused medicines; Santa Cruz' program includes sharps.