

ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY MEDICAL SHARPS PROGRAMS IN OKLAHOMA

The Oklahoma Meds & Sharps Disposal Committee (OMSDC) is a statewide working group, facilitated by the Product Stewardship Institute (PSI) with grant support and collaboration from the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality (ODEQ), that helps establish collection programs for home-generated needles and syringes, known as medical “sharps.” In early 2022, it initiated a six-month sharps disposal pilot project at five Oklahoma sites, and continues to develop sharps take-back infrastructure.

This overview complements PSI’s report “Establishing Community Medical Sharps Programs: A Guide for Municipalities, Pharmacies, Health Clinics, and Nonprofits in Oklahoma” published in June 2022, which provides step-by-step support to facilitate the establishment of home-generated medical sharps collection programs for residents.

BACKGROUND: U.S. & OKLAHOMA

Medical sharps are life-savers. These convenient devices are used by millions of consumers to safely self-inject prescribed medications outside of health-care settings. Unfortunately, home-generated medical sharps waste is often unsafely disposed of: Although the U.S. FDA and EPA both advise against it, each year 7% of sharps are flushed and an estimated three billion are trashed. In addition to prescription self-injections, over three million Americans inject controlled substances using sharps, some of which are also flushed, trashed, or littered.

When medical sharps are improperly disposed of, they pose grave health and safety risks to residents, waste management personnel, and medical workers. Even FDA-compliant containers can be crushed by trash compactors, releasing loose sharps that can jam equipment and create hazards. A 2018 survey showed that 53% of materials recovery facilities observed needles in household waste at least weekly; over half reported one or more needle-stick injury in 2016.

Each year in Oklahoma, more than 100,000 residents self-injecting prescribed medications generate as many as 60 million needles and thousands more are estimated to use sharps with controlled substances. In 2021, the Oklahoma State Legislature legalized privately funded programs to capture used sharps; according to state law, residents are also permitted to place medical sharps in the trash if they are sealed in a rigid plastic container. However, for reasons outlined above, there is still a need for safe, affordable disposal options provided by safe and convenient sharps collection programs.

OKLAHOMA SHARPS TAKE-BACK

To address the needs of Oklahoma residents, some hospitals and medical clinics accept sharps from their patients, as do a limited number of businesses, following OSHA regulations. In addition, some cities have developed occasional, annual, or ongoing sharps take-back events.

However, these collection opportunities are not always convenient and/or available to the general public. PSI's report, "Establishing Community Medical Sharps Programs: A Guide for Municipalities, Pharmacies, Health Clinics, and Nonprofits in Oklahoma," provides step-by-step support to facilitate the establishment of home-generated medical sharps collection programs for residents by following these steps:

Step One: Understand Community Needs - Model, Partnership, Budget, Vendors

Program models include mail-back, drop-off/kiosk, door-to-door pickup, and HHW facility/collection events; models can also be combined into a customized program.

Step Two: Estimate Costs and Select Vendors

Sharps take-back program costs are comprised of three cost categories: collection and operations, transportation and disposal, and education and outreach.

Step Three: Implement, Promote, and Evaluate

Implementation requires working closely with vendors and staff and being flexible and willing to adjust program design; program promotion is also critical to success.

Step Four: Join and share!

There are examples of municipal medical sharps collection programs in Oklahoma and across the U.S., but many do not collection information. The final step is to join the OMSDC and contribute data about sharps collection programs so that other municipalities can learn the best practices that can make their communities safer, too.