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Home-Generated Sharps and Pharmaceutical Waste

By Designating a Lead Agency, the State Could Increase Proper Disposal

Background

Californians use and obtain hundreds of millions of sharps—syringes and other devices used to penetrate the skin to deliver medication—and prescription medications. Improperly disposing of home-generated sharps and pharmaceutical waste can potentially pose health, safety, and environmental risks.

Our Key Recommendations

The Legislature should consider the following changes:

 Of the four state agencies involved in overseeing or regulating home-generated sharps and pharmaceutical waste, assign the Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery (CalRecycle) as the lead state agency with oversight responsibilities over the proper disposal of home-generated sharps and pharmaceutical waste.

 As part of CalRecycle’s responsibilities, require it to implement a public education campaign and maintain an up-to-date and well publicized list of collection sites.

Key Findings

- The State’s oversight of home-generated sharps and pharmaceutical waste is fragmented.
 - » Consumers receive inconsistent messages for proper disposal methods of this waste from state and federal agencies—some that directly contradict each other.
 - » Sharps waste is classified differently depending on where consumers dispose of it and several government agencies oversee its disposal, depending on the disposal method.
 - » There is no defined regulatory framework for home-generated pharmaceutical waste.
- Most consumers in urban areas have reasonable access to disposal sites for home-generated sharps and pharmaceutical waste but may not be aware of these locations because the State does not communicate accessible, reliable information.
 - » Eighty-nine percent of Californians live within a 20-minute drive of free collection sites, but those in less-populated areas do not live reasonably close to such sites.
 - » Although two agencies publish lists of statewide collection sites on their websites, the lists are not up-to-date, readily accessible, or user-friendly.
- The State does not have comprehensive and reliable data on the amount of home-generated sharps and pharmaceutical waste that consumers generate or how they dispose of it.
- Although the State has sufficient capacity to process a significant increase in sharps or pharmaceutical waste, one type of waste is mostly disposed of out of state—government recommendations and legal requirements discourage in-state incinerators from accepting pharmaceutical waste.

Access to Sharps and Pharmaceutical Waste Collection Sites Varies Based on the Driving Time Considered

SERVICE AREA RADIUS (IN MINUTES OF DRIVE TIME)	SHARPS		PHARMACEUTICAL	
	POPULATION	PERCENTAGE	POPULATION	PERCENTAGE
10	27,300,000	72%	26,000,000	68%
15	33,200,000	87	32,300,000	85
20	35,400,000	93	34,600,000	91
25	36,200,000	95	35,700,000	94
30	36,700,000	96	36,300,000	95