

# New COSSAP Drug Disposal Program Tackles Hidden Driver of Substance Abuse

Catching Up With COSSAP, April 2021

COSSAP is taking direct aim at one of the unsung drivers of the nation's substance use epidemic—the mountain of unused prescription medications that fill America's medicine cabinets—in a new program that will align state and local efforts to dispose of drugs with successful federal initiatives such as the [Drug Enforcement Administration's](#) (DEA) [National Prescription Drug Take Back Day](#).



The [Comprehensive Secure and Responsible Drug Disposal Program](#), launched in April 2021, will enable eight jurisdictions (below) selected through a competitive [solicitation](#) process to purchase drug disposal and collection equipment so they can undertake their own drug take-back activities. By enlisting local partners such as law enforcement agencies, first responders, service providers, and pharmacies in those efforts, the program leverages a signature feature of COSSAP—interdisciplinary approaches to substance abuse—to ensure maximum community buy-in and sustainability.

The eight sites, spanning state, county, and municipal jurisdictions from Minnesota to South Carolina, will purchase dozens of drop boxes and tens of thousands of at-home disposal pouches and then work with local law enforcement agencies following DEA and other federal guidance to oversee the collection and destruction of both prescription medications and controlled substances.

The projects will feature leadership groups comprising public safety and public health partners dedicated to making safe drug storage and disposal a high public priority—paying particular attention to relationships with local pharmacies responsible for prescribing medications—as well as public education campaigns in conjunction with drug take-back events.

## America: Awash With Unused and Undisposed Drugs

The new program is grounded in the daunting reality that the United States is awash with unused and undisposed prescription drugs: At least 40 percent of prescription medications are not completely used and are likely to remain inside the home, where insecure storage poses serious risks to both the immediate safety and long-term health of vulnerable populations such as children, adolescents, and individuals with substance use disorders.

As a result, the combination of unused prescription medications, poor storage practices, and lack of drug disposal is an underreported driver of the nation's substance abuse epidemic but a deeply impactful one because together, these inefficiencies interact to enable the diversion of opioids for nonmedical use on a massive scale.

[A 2019 study](#) found that between two-thirds and nine-tenths of surgery patients reported unused opioids and that among those patients, between 42 and 71 percent of all tablets went unused. Given that many patients perceive a future utility for those opioids in the event acute pain returns, stockpiling has emerged as an important engine of drugs' nonmedical use. Consequently, the same study found that opioids are seldom stored and disposed of correctly: Between 73 and 77 percent of patients reported that their prescription opioids were not stored in locked containers.

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Partly as a result, the [2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) reported that 54 percent of people who misused an opioid medication in the past year obtained opioids from a friend or relative, and most of those pills were either given for free, bought, or taken without asking. The second largest source of misused opioids (36 percent) were prescriptions from one or more health care provider. Among the consequences: More than 70,000 emergency room visits result from unintentional drug poisoning among children each year.

## Drug Take-Back Programs: An Effective Response

In the face of the critical need to increase public awareness about proper medication disposal, unused drug take-back programs have emerged as an effective strategy for safe disposal. The DEA launched National Prescription Drug Take Back Day in 2010 to engage Americans actively in the safe disposal of prescription medications with the support of both public safety and public health agencies. The DEA, in collaboration with the Office of National Drug Control Policy, was also instrumental in securing passage of the [Secure and Responsible Drug Disposal Act](#) the same year, which designated four general take-back mechanisms: community collection events, stationing of permanent drop boxes in law enforcement agencies, similar drop box placement in other locations, and mail-back programs. The Food and Drug Administration has also provided guidelines for people who want to dispose of medications at home.

The resulting success of Drug Take Back Day speaks to the scale of the disposal challenge: Since 2010, the program has collected nearly 13.7 million pounds of expired, unused, and unwanted prescription drugs. On the [most recent Drug Take Back Day](#), October 24, 2020, the American public turned in nearly 1 million pounds—almost 493 tons—of medication to DEA and 4,153 of its community partners at 4,587 collection sites nationwide.



## Comprehensive Secure and Responsible Drug Disposal Program Sites

- Cuyahoga Falls Police Department (Ohio)
- Clark County Sheriff's Office (Ohio)
- Indiana Department of Health
- Morrison County Sheriff's Department (Minnesota)
- Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Control
- Orangeburg Department of Public Safety (South Carolina)
- Tennessee Bureau of Investigation Dangerous Drugs Task Force
- Wisconsin Department of Justice

**19<sup>th</sup> National Take Back Day: October 24, 2020**  
Total Weight Collected: 985,392 lbs. (492.7 Tons)

