

## Safe disposal of unwanted medicines urged

Collections planned to curtail contamination of water

BY MIKE CRONIN  
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TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Nobody knows the long-term effects of prescription medications getting into the drinking-water supply, said George Mihalovich.

"That's the danger," said Mihalovich, the co-chair of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Hazardous Waste Task Force, a project of the Pennsylvania Resources Council in the South Side. "We don't want those substances in people's bodies. All

drugs have side effects. We're concerned they might cause problems."

The task force and other organizations throughout Western Pennsylvania are sponsoring several collection drives so that people can turn in their unwanted, unused or expired medications without having to resort to old, reliable methods that end up putting the pharmaceuticals in the water supply.

"Some people flush their old medications down the toilet," said Ellen Keefe, executive director of West-

moreland Cleanways. "That's not the way it should be done."

The task force and Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield are sponsoring a collection of unwanted medications from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Oct. 23 at the Mt. Lebanon Municipal Building. There is a cost of \$3 per person. Registration is required at [www.swpahhw.org](http://www.swpahhw.org) or by calling 412-488-7452.

"Take-Back Day" is scheduled for Sept. 25. Conceived by the Drug Enforcement Administration and

sponsored by several local organizations, it allows people to safely dispose of unwanted prescription and over-the-counter drugs, as well as medications for pets and other animals.

Collection spots that day include the Whitehall Public Library, the Giant Eagle in Ohio Township, and police stations in Baldwin, East Pittsburgh, Monroeville, McKeesport and Carmichaels. Medications in pill form only will be accepted from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Greensburg police station parking lot, Murrysburg Community Library and the Lincoln Road Shop 'n Save in Latrobe.

Sam Dinkins, an environmental

specialist with the Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation Commission, said the group in 2009 undertook a study at several points along the river of "emerging contaminants," including pharmaceuticals and personal-care products such as cosmetics and sunscreen.

The government has no regulatory standards for pharmaceuticals in rivers and other bodies of water, he said.

"This initial effort sought to merely determine which of the 158 contaminants tested for are present in the

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## Economy dampens turnout

BY CHRIS TOGNERI  
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Tens of thousands of Labor Day parade participants



## Experts urge safe disposal of unwanted medicines

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river and at what levels," Dinkins said. "Further research is necessary to determine if the levels are environmentally significant."

An estimated 200 million pounds of pharmaceutical waste are generated each year, according to Dave Mazza, regional director of the Pennsylvania Resources Council. In May, the hazardous waste task force received nearly 700 pounds of pharmaceuticals at its first collection event.

There has been no consensus about what to do with old medications. According to Keefe, only recently has the Environmental Protection Agency backed away from telling people to flush unwanted pills.

Both Keefe and the EPA say pills should be crushed and mixed with a substance like used cat litter or coffee grounds. The material should be tightly sealed and tossed into a garbage can.

Old medications should not be incinerated, Keefe said.

Jim Brucker, manager of the Franklin Township Municipal Sanitary Authority, a sponsor of Take-Back Day, said studies in Europe have identified waterborne drug residue having potentially important consequences for fish and other aquatic life.

It would cost "millions of dollars" to make most municipal water treatment plants capable of eliminating pharmaceutical residue, he said.

"Sewage treatment plants can't (presently) treat for drugs," Brucker said. "What's in the water is just too minute."

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Firefighters look over the damage after battling a fire Monday that damaged neighboring structures on Green Street in North Belle Vernon.

## Family of 4 flees fire, but snakes die

FIRE · FROM B1

The officer, he said, pulled him away from the house and used a stun device on him when he went back toward the house.

Baker said he wasn't injured and isn't angry at the officer. "It was a judgment call. In his opinion, he was right to do it. In my opinion, he was wrong for stopping me from protecting my property."

Baker said firefighters tried to save the snakes. "A couple of the brave ones carried them out for us. I can't give those guys a big enough pat on the back."

The Bakers said they will take the five surviving snakes to a veterinarian, but they fear all will die within a few weeks from respiratory infections caused by smoke. Monica Baker said few snakes survive such infections.

Neighbors are caring for the birds. Another neighbor gave the Bakers a small aquarium to house the snakes temporarily.

The Bakers said they have been renting the house on Green Street since March. Damon Baker said he

*"It was a judgment call. In his opinion, he was right to do it. In my opinion, he was wrong for stopping me from protecting my property."*

**DAMON BAKER**

MAN WHOSE HOME WAS DESTROYED BY FIRE

moved his family to North Belle Vernon for his job on a natural gas drilling rig.

Monica Baker, who said she is pregnant with triplets, said she has no relatives in the area to assist them with housing. The couple and their children last night were staying in a hotel provided by the American Red Cross.

The Bakers' residence and a neighboring house were destroyed in the fire, according to North Belle Vernon fire Chief Ken Ramsdell. He said the cause of the fire is unknown.

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