Community Engagement on Safe Medicine Return

Since 2021, the state of Oregon has had a program to make sure people have ways to safely dispose of the medicines they no longer need. The program is called Oregon's Safe Medicine Return program.

MED-Project works together with Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality to run this program.

There are many ways people can safely get rid of their medicines. People can:

- Leave medicines at a local drop box, like at a pharmacy or police station.
- Pick up a mail-back package with the address and postage on it at certain places.
- Ask for a mail-back package online at medtakebackoregon.org or through a call center. People can do this in multiple languages.

When this program began in 2021, Oregon's Kitchen Table worked with MED-Project to hear from people in Oregon. We asked what the easiest way would be to turn in medicines that people no longer need in a safe and secure way. MED-Project used people's input to set up the program so it would work for communities across Oregon.

Many things have changed since 2021. So, MED-Project partnered again with OKT in the fall of 2025. OKT and MED-Project wanted to hear from people in Oregon about how the Safe Medicine Return program was working. We also wanted to hear people's ideas about what could help people know about and use the program. What people shared will help MED-Project improve the Safe Medicine Return program in Oregon.

OKT used conversations and surveys to hear from people. This summary tells what OKT heard.

About Oregon's Kitchen Table

OKT is part of Portland State University. OKT works to give all people a voice in public decisions. We talk with people who usually aren't included in these decisions. We help people talk about state, local, and regional issues. We use many ways and many languages to learn what

people think and experience. And we value the wide range of ideas and experiences that people tell us about.

How we heard from people

OKT used the following ways to hear from people:

- Interviews
- Online surveys in English and Spanish
- Discussions with people at community events
- Online and in-person discussions
- We partnered with community organizers to hear from people in their communities.

These are the ways we told people about the surveys and events:

- Social media
- Email
- In-person outreach at events

What we asked people about

First, we told people about the Safe Medicine Return program and how it works. We also told people that MED-Project wants to hear from them.

Next, we asked people about these topics:

- What people do with medicine that is expired or they no longer need;
- What people know about Oregon's Safe Medicine Return program;
- What could make it hard for people to return medicine;
- What could make it easier;
- How technology can help people know about or use the program;
- What people's experiences with requesting and using prepaid mail-back packages have been; and
- What would help people know about this program.

The survey also asked questions about who was taking it. That helped OKT know who we heard from. The survey asked people where they live, their age, their job, their race, ethnicity or Tribe, their zip code, and the language they speak.

Who we heard from

We heard from nearly 300 people. About 126 people participated in a conversation. Additionally, 139 people shared their thoughts through a survey. Around 25 people participated in an interview. We wanted to hear from communities that MED-Project had not heard as much

from in the past. This included people who live in rural areas, people whose first language is something other than English, and people who provide end-of-life (hospice) care.

What we heard

Almost everyone we talked to has medicine that is expired or that they no longer need. We heard from some people who know about the Safe Medicine Return program. Many others are just learning about it. We heard many stories about people or their loved ones who need help getting rid of medicine they stored in their cabinet or after a loved one's death. Many people were relieved and grateful to find out about this program.

When we asked about what could make it easier for people to return medicine, many people said that knowing about the program is the first step. People agreed that they want the program to be simple and have as few steps as possible. People want basic, clear information about the program and how to use it. They need to know what kinds of medicine they can turn in through the program. And, they want information to be available in the languages that they speak at home.

Returning medicine instead of throwing it away is a new idea for many people. So, people think sharing why the program exists is important. Some people want to keep their homes safe so no one gets sick by mistake. Others want to protect the environment and keep chemicals out of our water. Letting people know why it is important will help people want to use the Safe Medicine Return program.

How to help people use the program

- Many people believe that pharmacies and doctors are the best places to learn about the program. They can give out clear instructions and provide ways for people to return medicine at the same time.
- People want more kiosks and places to pick up mail-back packages in places they already visit. This includes the post office, grocery store, or a health clinic.
- Some people or organizations would like to host kiosks, pass out mail-back packages, or help people return medications. But, they need clear rules and information so they feel safe.
- Some people have said that the kiosks in pharmacies where they live are often full or hard to find.
- Hospice workers would like to receive regular large shipments of mail-back packages. Then they could pass them out to families without having to request them over and over again.
- In rural areas, kiosks and post offices can be far away. People can request mail-back packages, but some people are worried about whether sending medicine through the mail is safe. And, sending and receiving packages can also be hard. So, many people in rural communities would like to have kiosks or mail-back packages in places they already go that are closer to where they live.
- Many people would like to be able to use text messages to ask for mail-back packages.

What would help people know about the program

- People suggested training people who already work closely with community members to share information. This includes home health workers, firefighters, social workers, and mental health specialists.
- People suggested MED-Project partner with trusted groups like senior centers, Meals on Wheels, and schools.
- People want information to be easily available in many formats and languages. This would help them share information with their community. People suggested using flyers, magnets for the fridge, social media posts, and radio ads. A toolkit that people can download and share would also be helpful.

What happens next

Many people who we talked to are eager to work with MED-Project. They want to help let their communities know about and use this program. Based on what we heard, we encourage MED-Project to follow up with these offers to help share about the program.

MED-Project could also:

- Train people to explain the program and help people in their communities use it; and
- Focus future engagement on a single community or county. This would let MED-Project see how the program is working and what barriers still exist.

Many different groups are involved in disposing of medication. Some ideas people had are beyond MED-Project's control. This includes state and federal rules about who can host a kiosk. We encourage MED-Project to share what they've heard with other partners.

We also encourage MED-Project to share updates on this program. It is helpful for people to see how their ideas changed the program. We are happy to help MED-Project with this.

Conclusion

We talked with many people who care deeply about the health and safety of their communities and protecting our natural environment. People are excited about the Safe Medicine Return program and want to help their communities know about and use it. People gave time and effort in many ways to make sure other people could share their voices on this topic. We encourage MED-Project and their partners to keep talking to and learning from communities.