DEA: Clean out your medicine cabinets Saturday

September 23 2010, By PETE YOST , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Tim Strain was a victim of prescription drugs, not an abuser. His girlfriend's mother gave the 18-year-old additional pain medication for a serious burn, producing a fatal drug interaction.

Now his parents, Bernie and Beverly Strain, want the memory of their son to make a difference for others. The suburban Philadelphia couple are joining with the Drug Enforcement Administration to encourage people to take a few minutes on Saturday to clean out their medicine cabinets.

The national prescription drug "Take-Back" campaign will offer more than 4,000 sites around the nation where the public can drop off expired, unused and unwanted prescription drugs.

"We have an epidemic," says acting DEA administrator Michele Leonhart, whose agency is working with thousands of state and local agencies and the Partnership for a Drug-Free America on Saturday's campaign.

"Our research shows that the No. 1 source of medicines that kids abuse is their own home medicine cabinet or a family member or friend's home," says Steve Pasierb, the partnership's president.

Unintentional overdose deaths involving prescription narcotics increased 175 percent in a six-year span to 11,001 in 2006, according to data collected by the federal government.

In 2009, there were 7 million Americans aged 12 years and older who abused prescription drugs for non-medical purposes within the previous month, up from 6.2 million in 2008.

At the DEA, "we're concerned that first-time drug users are just as likely to use pharmaceutical drugs as they are marijuana; every day on average 2,500 teens use prescription drugs to get high for the first time," Leonhart said in an interview. "We are seeing a trend where 56 percent of teens think prescription drugs are easier to get, two of five teens believe prescription drugs are much safer than other drugs and three in 10 teens believe prescription drugs are not addictive."

Over the past two years, the DEA has nearly doubled the number of agents assigned to investigate the diversion of prescription drugs into illegal channels and is strengthening its regulatory oversight on DEA-registered manufacturers, distributors and retailers who handle these substances.

The DEA also is employing the Ryan Haight Online Pharmacy Consumer Protection Act that makes it harder for cyber-criminals to illegally sell prescription drugs via the Internet.

The Take-Back event also is a way to address environmental problems that arise when unwanted prescription drugs are flushed down the toilet or dumped at a landfill. Residue from the drugs can end up at wastewater treatment plants that cannot handle the chemicals. Or the chemicals can leach out into groundwater. The DEA incinerates the unwanted prescription drugs it collects.

It is illegal to turn over controlled substances to anyone other than law enforcement officers. But legislation sponsored by Sens. John Cornyn, R-Texas, and Amy Klobochar, D-Minn., would allow state and private entities to institute responsible drug take-back programs. A measure

sponsored by Rep. Jay Enslee, D-Wash., would allow local communities to create safe drug disposal programs.

"As parents and grandparents, we do everything we need to do to childproof; now we need teen-proof by getting medicine out of the medicine cabinet," said Leonhart.

The DEA's Take-Back campaign grew out of local and state efforts by people like the Strains, who live in Manayunk, Pa.

"I am committed to keeping our youngest son's memory alive, and if we can save another person's child it will be worth it," Bernie Strain said. "We don't want this to happen to anyone else - teenager or senior citizen."

Tim Strain was an animal lover who wanted to become a veterinarian. He had been taking properly prescribed painkillers after his hands were seriously burned in a lawn mower accident.

Last May 24 would have been Tim's 19th birthday. In the Senate, it was declared "Timothy Strain Prescription Drug Disposal Awareness Day" in a resolution introduced by Sen. Bob Casey Jr., D-Pa.

More information: Drug drop sites: http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/takeback/

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