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HEALTH: Opponents say the measure creates a hardship for diabetics and millions of others.

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Backers of a new state law outlawing the tossing of hypodermic needles into trash cans say it will protect sanitation workers and the public from exposure to blood-borne diseases, but critics worry it will create hardships for diabetes sufferers and others who use needles.

The law, which takes effect Monday, requires people to place needles in a special container and dispose of it at a hazardous-waste or medical-waste facility, or through a mail-back program.

Supporters say the bill will ensure the safety of workers who handle solid waste at a time of surging at-home needle use. At least 2 million Californians use needles to treat diabetes and millions more are self-injecting to treat other illnesses such as multiple sclerosis.

"We hope to see a big reduction in the growing number of needles that are found in the waste stream," Kent Stoddard, vice president of public affairs for Waste Management Inc., said in a statement.

Although waste-management officials say they are not aware of any cases in which a discarded needle has transmitted a blood-borne pathogen such as HIV, they fear that it could, especially with the increasing use of needles by the public. And they add that contaminated needles in landfills can leach through the soil into underground springs and waterways or groundwater.

The law makes California one of the first states to ban the millions of needles and lancets - those used at home to medicate or self-test -

from being thrown in the trash.

But while most agree that the safety of workers is a priority, the ban poses an inconvenience to a population that may be immobile due to illness. It relies on residents to dispose of so-called sharps in containers on their own, or use a mail-in program that could be costly for some, according to the American Diabetes Association.

"While the association believes in the utility of the above methods, it does not support any endeavor that forces people with diabetes to face additional obstacles," said Lisa Murdock, director of government affairs for the western division of the American Diabetes Association.

Others say this latest ban is another example of policies set in place, with little thought on how residents will comply.

"We say that this is a ban without a plan," said **Heidi Sanborn**, executive director of the California Product Stewardship Council. "The law was passed without the mandate and the funding and the coordination to have a statewide program," Sanborn said.

One proposed bill, AB 501, would expand the new law by requiring pharmaceutical manufacturers to provide either a prepaid mail-back container or a container that can be taken to a clinic, physician or pharmacy that accepts home-generated sharps.

Meanwhile, the Los Angeles Bureau of Sanitation is hoping pharmacies and other medical offices will help dispose of the items if a container cannot be brought to a collection center.

"We are reaching out to all doctors' offices, medical establishments, pharmacies, retail store distributors of (needles), veterinary offices, hospitals, health and diabetes clinics, and drug counselors to form partnerships ... to create an infrastructure to make it convenient for residents to safely dispose of (needles)," Bureau of Sanitation Director Enrique Zaldivar said.

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