Sorting, recycling workers on pins and needles

By Jennifer Bonnett/News-Sentinel Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, March 25, 2015 11:18 pm

It’s 10 a.m. at the Cal-Waste Recovery Systems’ materials and recycling center in northwest Galt.

Already, workers have removed close to two dozen uncapped hypodermic needles from the conveyer belt.

Line leader Desiree Lewis, who meticulously sorts through discarded newspapers, empty tin cans and cardboard by hand, saw the first two and hit the system’s pause button. That allows her to use tongs to remove the improperly dumped needles and place them in a bright red sharps container to be picked up by a medical waste company.

Lewis will touch as many as 108 items per minute.

She worries as she grabs for paper or two-liter bottles that she may get stuck by a needle improperly dumped in a recycling cart.

Although she hasn’t been pricked with a needle while at work, if she ever is, Lewis will immediately go to the doctor to bring her Hepatitis B shots up to current and have several vials of blood drawn.

Six months later there will be another blood test, and yet another six months after that. It won’t be until a year after the incident that she will know whether she has contracted hepatitis or HIV from a lancet or any other sharp items.

“If I got sick, who would take care of my kids?” said Lewis, a single mother of five.

She personally knows what some of her peers have gone through after being pricked through their gloves. “They were scared,” Lewis said. “They did a lot of praying.”

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than a half-million accidental sticks occur annually, with many of those injuries going unreported. Sharps often end up at places like Galt’s recycling center, where workers who come into contact with the used needles can be hurt, or worse, contract a life-threatening disease.

Now, a group of Galt students is raising awareness about such dangers.
“Legislators passed a law to make it illegal to throw needles and sharps in the trash, but they didn’t mandate a system to safely dispose them. For residents in Galt, one has to travel a distance to safely dispose them,” said Youth Commissioner adviser John Gordon, who added that he didn’t realize the significance of the issue until the commission decided to take it on as a community project recently.

**Disposal options limited**

Residents in Galt who use syringes to inject insulin and other medicine are required to take their used needles to the designated hazardous materials center in South Sacramento.

Because they are considered medical waste, needles must be placed in puncture-proof containers and taken to special drop-off sites, often located miles away.

That distance is a problem, said Pete Lombardi, Cal-Waste plant manager, because most people who use needles are elderly and prefer not to drive that far.

Or, they can pay to participate in a program through the mail where used needles are mailed in a safe package and, in return, new ones are mailed back. But that can be expensive, according to Lombardi.

Some Bay Area communities — which tend to be more progressive that the San Joaquin Valley, Lombardi said — offer drop-off programs at their local transfer stations. Galt’s is not licensed to do that.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the use of needles in both pets and people, especially as healthcare has shifted and more patients are being sent home from hospitals with directions on how to self-inject medicine.

“The state passes the ban then, no pun intended, counties, cities and waste haulers get stuck with the cost of needles, and they can’t raise rates high enough to pay for the disposal,” said Heidi Sanborn, executive director of the California Product Stewardship Council.

The nonprofit, formed seven years ago shortly after the state law went into effect, has been involved in legislation aimed at keeping needles out of garbage and recycling streams.

**No ordinance in Lodi**

In Galt, youth commissioners are hopeful the city council will pass an ordinance requiring local businesses who dispense needles to take them back at no cost. After researching the issue for several months, they gave a presentation at last week’s council meeting and City Attorney Steven Rudolph took the idea under submission.

A few communities have local needle disposal ordinances, including San Francisco, Sacramento and, most recently, Tulare.

In Lodi, the Police Department holds an annual collection event where residents can drop off used
needles sealed in containers.

That’s where City of Lodi Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services head Jeff Hood disposed of used syringes used for injections for a family member.

“Unless you live near a hazardous waste collection site, there’s no convenient way to dispose of them,” he said.

“I have a lot of empathy for people who need multiple injections a day.”

At the Galt location, the risk to employees is greater than elsewhere because he has 30 people like Lewis in direct contact with recyclables.

If a needle is spotted on a conveyor belt, the entire system is shut down for an average of three minutes to remove the item with the special tongs. This happens at least five times a day, according to Lombardi.

Brian Hamilton, who works at the Sacramento County Department of Waste Management and Recycling, didn’t have a chance to see the needle that pricked him in 2012.

He was cleaning out oil sludge that had collected in the facility’s used motor oil draining structure when he discovered the hard way that someone had dumped their used needles into the oil before recycling the entire container. After he felt the sharp pain, he immediately cleaned the area where the needle punctured his skin and notified his supervisor.

“The more difficult part was the needle was coated with oil, (so) there was no way to test it for potential health hazards,” waste management program manager Douglas Kobold said, recalling the incident. “On the sort lines at recycling facilities, there is a better chance they can find the actual needle that stuck the employee and have it sent off for testing.”

**Year-long blood tests**

In Galt, if a worker is poked with a needle from a syringe, he or she immediately heads to Lombardi’s office. As the employee is washing his or her hands, Lombardi is on the phone with a worksite health clinic, reporting the injury and receiving documented medical advice from a triage nurse.

Meanwhile, his or her peers are searching the conveyor belt for signs — including discarded mail or medication bottles — to try to determine where that needle may have come from to get a better idea of what it may have contained.

The employee will then go to the doctor to ensure his or her Hepatitis B shots are current (and if not, they will be made current) and have blood drawn for a series of tests.

Last year, there were five sticks at the Galt center; of those injured, none contracted a blood-borne
pathogen.

But during that year’s time of waiting for test results, Lombardi pointed out, female victims have to ask themselves whether they might become pregnant, and both genders might need to protect against unprotected sex and discuss the potential of contracting a disease with their partner — because you really don’t know until after a year.

After his year-long series of blood tests, Hamilton received a clean bill of health.

Before she started work at the Galt recycling facility about 18 months ago, Lewis said she didn’t even think about the hazards workers face by sorting through recyclables with their hands. Now, she sees needles on a daily basis.

“It’s scary. You gasp. Your heart stops for a moment, and you think, ‘What if?’”

From her viewpoint, Lewis thinks more education is needed, possibly in the form of a pamphlet distributed along with needles at a pharmacy, or even through the doctors’ office, about where to properly dispose of sharps.

In the end, Gordon said he’s impressed with the youth that want to do something about the issue. “They’re trying to provide greater convenience to our residents while improve safety for the Cal-Waste employees sorting through the recycling.”

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