A DRUG DISPOSAL BOX created by MedReturn, a subsidiary of Frank Mayer & Associates in Grafton.

MedReturn president testifies at Congressional hearing on proliferation of prescription abuse cases

The origins of the MedReturn program were modest, but the campaign developed by a Grafton business is making waves around the nation.

Mike Mayer, president of MedReturn LLC, discussed the drug-collection program this month during testimony before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Mayer's testimony, delivered April 14 in Washington, D.C., was part of a hearing titled "Warning: The Growing Danger of Prescription Drug Diversion."

MedReturn is a subsidiary of Frank Mayer & Associates, an 80-year-old Grafton company that designs and manufactures in-store displays and interactive kiosks. The display company has an impressive roster of commercial clients, including Walmart, Nintendo, LEGO, Walgreens and Microsoft.

Mayer is the third-generation president of the company.

However, MedReturn grew from the company's desire to grow beyond its traditional niche.

"The genesis of MedReturn was over three years ago when I challenged the associates in my company to research and develop new ideas. The challenge was called WITT (Wish I'd Thought of That)," Mayer said during the Congressional hearing.

"As we began investigating the prescription drug disposal issue, we quickly became aware of the magnitude of prescription medication and drugs that sit unused or expired in our medicine chests. It is staggering to think that over 10 million prescriptions are filled on a daily basis."

He said that sheer volume of medication distributed in the country opens the door to countless cases of misuse and accidental poisoning. In addition, Mayer said, improper disposal of medications threatens the environment.

He told federal lawmakers the human toll of misused medications is staggering — more than 27,000 drug-abuse deaths were recorded in 2007 and 2,500 teens use prescription drugs recreationally for the first time each year.

"We began researching and looking for existing collection and take-back programs and realized there was no consistent method or program available," Mayer said.

"Over a 2-1/2-year period, we developed, prototyped, presented, tested, improved and produced a safe, secure and sustainable enclosure to collect expired and unwanted prescription medication and over-the-counter drugs."

The sturdy, steel collection boxes were introduced during an October 2010 conference of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

Each unit includes a locked repository, stands nearly five feet tall and weighs 167 pounds. They cost $900 each.

Since the boxes were introduced, the program has gained sweeping support and is now offered through 50 police and sheriff's departments across 11 states.

Ozaukee County became one of the pilot programs for the collection system, with drop boxes available seven days a week at the Port Washington, Grafton, Cedarburg and Mequon police stations, as well as on a more limited basis at the Saukville police station, Thiensville Village Hall and the Sheriff's Department.

Mayer told Congressional leaders he has been overwhelmed by the response to the collection program.

"What started as an effort to supplement our core business has quickly evolved into a passionate desire to be a small part of the solution to the prescription-drug abuse problem. We

have devoted and continue to devote significant amounts of time and money to let state and local law enforcement agencies and community groups know we are available to answer their inquiries," Mayer said.

He said working closely with federal regulators on the drop boxes has been eye opening.

"This whole realm of government regulation is new to us," Mayer said.

He said he is optimistic community and corporate involvement can reduce the likelihood of drug-related tragedies.

"We see the implementation of medication collection programs as a great opportunity for members of the community to coalesce around the cause of protecting vulnerable populations, our teens and young adults. A true community-wide effort can enlist groups ranging from parents, school administrators, business people, anti-drug coalitions, environmental interests, pharmacists and law enforcement. In the end, it is law enforcement that is on the front lines of medication return," Mayer said.

He concluded his testimony by appealing to Congressional leaders.

"We hope you will continue to consider the challenges of those who want to establish drug-collection programs at the grass roots level," Mayer said.

Among the other witnesses testifying before the subcommittee were: Gil Kerlikowske, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy; Michele Leonhart, administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration; Arthur Dean, chairman and CEO of Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America; and several members of families that have lost children to prescription drug overdoes.

"It was a great experience to be a part of something that hopefully will be moving forward. I can't tell you how many times I heard the word 'epidemic' used to describe the problem of misuse of prescription drugs," Mayer said.

As yet another sign of the business world's willingness to assist in tackling the drug-misuse problem, Saukville's Charter Steel has agreed to incinerate medications collected in Ozaukee County in one of its industrial furnaces.