

When it drains, it pours!

By Carlene Brown

As rain water washes over roofs, streets, driveways, sidewalks, parking lots, and land surfaces, it can pick up a variety of pollutants, such as oil, pesticides, chemicals, soil and leaves. This polluted storm water drains into the storm system that eventually clog our drains and discharges into our rivers and streams. These pollutants can endanger the water quality of our waterways, making them unhealthy for people, fish, and wildlife.

Unfortunately, many people mistakenly believe the drains connect directly to the sewage-treatment plant, and use them to dispose of harmful substances like used motor oil. In an effort to change that harmful behavior, some cities have come up with creative ways to draw attention to these drains.

Some cities are conducting storm drain markings/painting events. Storm drain marking has a few potential benefits:

1. The storm drain marking event provides an excellent opportunity for publicity about keeping storm drains free of yard waste, pet waste, and household chemicals.
2. Those who are involved in the marking process learn about the storm drain system and pollution prevention behaviors.
3. If people see the marker (or painting), they might become more aware that whatever enters a storm drain goes directly to local waters. And they might be less likely to dump illegally down the drain.
4. Hopefully, if people are more careful about what enters storm drains, then water quality will be improved.

Another way to help minimize clogged drains is to establish an Adopt-a-Storm Drain program. Similar to Adopt-a-Street or Park, Adopt-a-Storm Drain is a program where citizens volunteer to inspect and clear storm drains throughout the year, which assists the member with maintenance.

One reason for the program's effectiveness is that residents have already been sweeping their streets and keeping the drains clear in their neighborhoods for years. In a way, people unofficially had adopted the drains before the program's start.

In some cities, citizens are taking it a step further and being allowed to name their drain. 'It's Draining Men' and 'Sir Drains a Lot' are just a couple of comical nicknames people have used as part of the volunteer adopt-a-drain program.

Members who are interested in developing these programs, should consider the following risk management recommendations:

1. Develop a policy outlining the expectations, rules, and guidelines of the program.
2. Provide an application for citizens to complete. The application should ask for the participant's name and contact information, the location of the drain(s) they want to adopt and a liability release with language to confirm in writing that they have read, understood and will abide by the program rules and guidelines.
3. Volunteers should be provided with all the equipment necessary to safely inspect, clean and maintain the storm drains they have adopted.
4. All volunteers should be required to log their volunteer time and this documentation should be submitted to the member so the hours can be reported to Washington State Department of Labor and Industries.

While this program won't eliminate a member's duty to maintain its storm drains, it can help reduce the risk of claims associated with blocked drains and pollutants going into the drains.

If you have questions, please contact your WCIA Risk Management Representative.