

NORTH CENTRAL TEXAS COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS (NCTCOG)

Community-Based Social Marketing Checklist

PREPARED BY
RESOURCE RECYCLING SYSTEMS (RRS)
FOR NCTCOG

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Introduction

Securing participant buy-in and establishing good sorting habits are key to the success of an organics recycling program. Low collection volumes and high contamination levels can undermine program operations, making it difficult to meet the program's purpose and goals. By recognizing that sorting organic waste involves a conscious shift in behavior and requires addressing barriers to adoption, communities can implement effective outreach and education initiatives through community-based social marketing (CBSM).

CBSM is a marketing framework that emphasizes strategic planning, audience-centric messaging, and measurable outcomes to foster sustainable behavior change. It focuses on research-based strategies for identifying and overcoming barriers to participation and leveraging benefits and motivators to instill change. Rather than mandating compliance through legislation or relying on passive education efforts, CBSM instills an awareness and understanding of behaviors, leading to a development of social norms.

Organics recycling and broad waste management programs have applied CBSM with great success. Tailored campaigns and approaches have been made with the aim of reducing contamination across community sectors, increasing awareness of programs, and driving participation, as shown in the program spotlights in this resource paper.

A light-touch checklist as a starting point for communities to adopt the strategies of CBSM to their own organics recycling programs is provided. Additional resources are available online, including McKenzie-Mohr & Associates' [Fostering Sustainable Behavior](#), the EPA's [Preventing Waste Food in Your Community: A Social Marketing Toolkit](#), [Tools of Change](#), and C+C's [Social Marketing Primer](#).

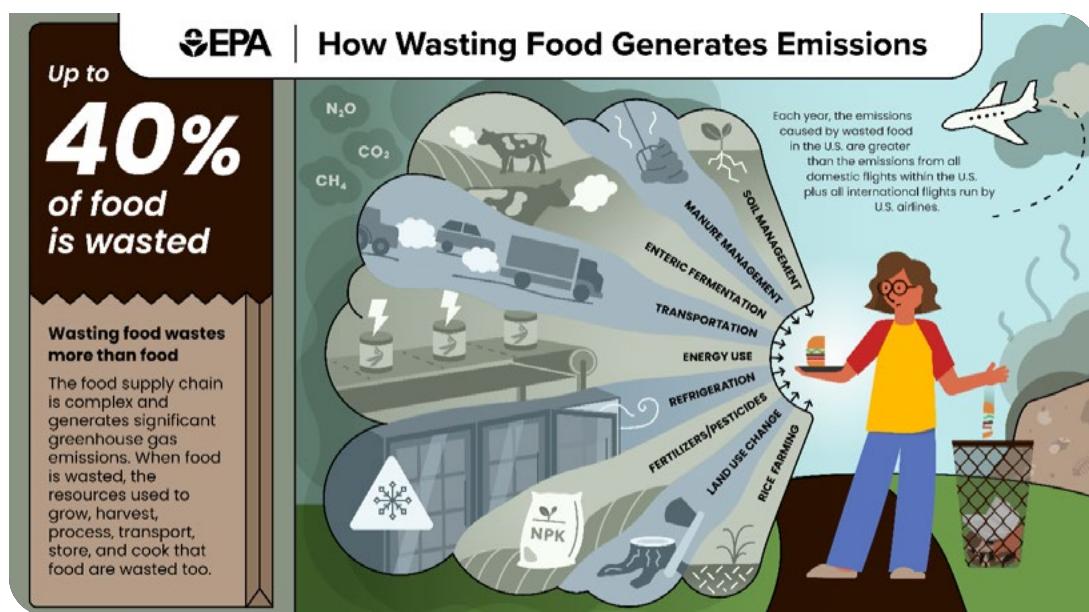


Figure 1: EPA Infographic on How Wasting Food Generates Emissions

Program Spotlights

Over the past several decades, CBSM has been used effectively across diverse communities in the United States. Several success stories are provided below.

CITY AND COUNTY OF DENVER, COLORADO

To boost curbside recycling participation, the City and County of Denver, Colorado implemented a study testing various behavioral interventions. One group had volunteer block leaders educate neighbors and deliver monthly recycling prompts, a second received pamphlet reminders timed just before collection day, a third was provided with general informational brochures, and a fourth served as the control group. Data on the number of times households recycled during a seven-week period found that the block leader approach was most effective, with approximately one-third of participating households recycling in comparison to the control group.



Figure 2: City and County of Denver Informational Flyer

CITY OF LAKELAND, FLORIDA

The City of Lakeland, Florida, began its CBSM-driven project by surveying residents and identifying the primary barrier to participation as confusion about what materials are recyclable. Based on these insights, the City established three key goals: reduce recycling contamination by 5%, decrease the presence of bagged recyclables and plastic wrap by encouraging 5% of customers to place "No Plastic Bags" stickers on their carts, and improve recycling knowledge among 20% of surveyed residents following the campaign.

To achieve these objectives, the City rebranded its recycling effort as Every Blue Cart Makes a Difference and developed the Bag-Free Recycling initiative aimed at promoting proper recycling practices. The campaign targeted City residents with curbside recycling and included new messaging, a redesigned recycling webpage, a multi-channel outreach strategy involving local media, direct resident communication, and social media engagement, and a free reusable bag to motivate residents to carry recyclables. A recycling composition study was conducted to assess outcomes before, during, and after the campaign. Lakeland achieved a 6% reduction in contamination, secured 5,100 resident commitments to avoid bagging recyclables, and cut processing costs by 50% with an outreach investment of just \$1.75 per household.



Figure 3: City of Lakeland Bag-Free Recycling Infographic

WASHINGTON STATE

Washington's Department of Ecology developed the [Recycling Contamination Reduction and Outreach Plan \(CROP\)](#) to identify current contamination issues and behavior, motivators and barriers to reducing contamination, and best management practices for reducing contamination in the recycling stream. Reviewing reports by the [Recycling Partnership](#) as well as local contamination rates, engaging local governments and recycling stakeholders, and analyzing behavioral drivers and barriers found that confusion, lack of trust in the recycling process, and lack of access to disposal tools contributed to greater contamination. This led to the [Recycle Right Campaign](#), which includes statewide consistent messaging and outreach tools to improve recycling sorting behavior.



Figure 4: Screenshot of Empty Clean Dry Video from Washington State's Recycle Right Campaign



Figure 5: City of Portland, Oregon Advertisement for Portland Composts

PHOTO SOURCES:

"Preventing Wasted Food in Your Community: Social Marketing Toolkit." U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2024, <https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/forms/preventing-wasted-food-your-community-social-marketing-toolkit>

"Don't Waste the Good Stuff!" City and County of Denver, 2025, <https://denvergov.org/files/assets/public/v/1/recycle-compost-and-trash/documents/2025-dont-waste-the-good-stuff-english.pdf>

"Lakeland Recycles." City of Lakeland, 2025, <https://www.lakelandgov.net/departments/public-works/solid-waste/recycling/>

"Partner Toolkit." Washington State Department of Ecology, 2025, <https://ecology.wa.gov/waste-toxics/reducing-recycling-waste/how-to-recycle/recycle-right/partner-toolkit>

"When You're Done With It, I Want It." City of Portland, Oregon, <https://www.portlandcomposts.com>

CBSM Checklist

This checklist provides a step-by-step process for developing a community-based social marketing outreach campaign.

PLAN REQUIREMENTS	STAFF COMMENTS
Define success	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Establish the purpose, or underlying reason for the campaign (e.g., reducing dependence on landfills, lowering greenhouse gas emissions, or promoting sustainable and cost-effective waste management).<input type="checkbox"/> Set measurable objectives with a focus on specific behavior changes (e.g., increasing household enrollment in curbside organics services, increasing household commitment to placing food scraps into organics containers, increasing households with backyard composting, or decreasing contamination rates).	
Conduct research	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Identify audiences (e.g., single-family homes with organics recycling carts, businesses that generate organic waste, or homeowners associations).<input type="checkbox"/> Assess current behaviors and attitudes using surveys, focus groups, or observational studies. Reference existing data from local recyclers, NCTCOG, universities, nonprofits, and community-based organizations.<input type="checkbox"/> Build audience profiles with information on barriers, benefits, and motivators (e.g., barriers can be confusion on compostable items or lack of access to containers, benefits can be cost savings from reduced trash services or positive environmental impact, and motivators can be emotional connections or physical incentives such as giveaways).	
Select a priority audience and behavior	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Pick one audience to focus on, taking into consideration equity concerns (e.g., low-income, rural, racial and ethnic minorities, or non-English speaking households).<input type="checkbox"/> Choose a single, high-impact behavior that is measurable (e.g., signing up for curbside organics collection services or sorting organic waste into the proper container).	
Develop strategies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Devise creative approaches using conducted research and best practices to overcome identified barriers for the selected audience. This may include:<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Commitments through pledges and sign-ups— Incentives such as free kitchen pails or discount services— Convenience such as easy access to bins and information— Champions and influencers such as block leaders— Feedback such as cart tagging— Awareness through toolkits, magnets, and other materials<input type="checkbox"/> Create messaging that resonates by incorporating cultural and community-specific nuances, keeping it simple and benefit-driven, and using hooks and consistent themes.<input type="checkbox"/> 'Journey map' to outline steps required to shift unwanted behaviors to desired ones (e.g., identifying opportunities or strategies to address patterns, and visualizing steps through timelines and diagrams).	

PLAN REQUIREMENTS	STAFF COMMENTS
Pilot the campaign	
<input type="checkbox"/> Test concepts and messaging on a small and measurable scale (e.g., conduct focus groups, A/B testing, or limited geographic roll-out).	
<input type="checkbox"/> Work with partners that have similar goals in mind (e.g., nonprofits, sustainability groups, or organics recycling collectors and processors).	
Measure and evaluate	
<input type="checkbox"/> Study impact on behavior (e.g., measure if total households subscribed to organics recycling have increased or contamination rates have decreased).	
<input type="checkbox"/> Refine strategies based on feedback and performance.	
Optimize and scale	
<input type="checkbox"/> Launch campaign to the entire audience, prioritizing high-performing tactics based on pilot and research.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Support local strategies as expansion occurs (e.g., facilitate workshops with communities to have CBSM strategies target local behaviors and barriers).	
<input type="checkbox"/> Leverage existing social networks and community leaders.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Continue to measure impact on objectives.	
Maintain and support	
<input type="checkbox"/> Keep materials and messaging current.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Reinforce behavior through ongoing engagement.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Celebrate success and share stories with audiences.	