

SANITATION & RECYCLING: REDUCING MUSCULOSKELETAL INJURIES BEST PRACTICES

Collecting trash and recycling continues to be one of the most hazardous occupations in America today. Sanitation collection has consistently been ranked 5th or 6th by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, behind such highly visible occupations as crab fishing and logging. Agency leaders should recognize the high frequency and high costs of injuries to sanitation and recycling collectors. Musculoskeletal injuries, especially to the backs and shoulders of collectors are the most common, among the costliest, and can be the most life-altering injuries. The following best practices should be taken to protect collectors.

Administrators

They set the tone and baseline for safe operations:

- The ultimate solution is to consider automated trucks where possible. Statistics demonstrate the use of automated solid waste collection trucks significantly reduces back and shoulder injuries. Conversion may be phased in as the collection fleet ages and is replaced.
- Where automated vehicles are not practical and manual collection must still be used, enact an ordinance on the size and weight of trash and recycling containers. Fifty (50) pounds is recommended and common.
- The ordinance should specify penalties for repeated non-compliance.
- Widely advertise the specifics of the ordinance to homeowners through Welcome Packages, stories in the local television and print media, and notices on the agency's website. Explain the toll of over-size and over-weight containers on local workers, who are often their neighbors.

Department Supervisors

They are the critical conduit between the agency administrators and employees in the field:

- Make sure employees know and can explain the reason behind the local ordinance to residents.
- Develop procedures for when an oversized or overweight container is found on the route. The homeowner will need to be notified and educated as to why their trash can was not emptied. The address will need to be documented and a database of repeat offenders developed.
- Hold frequent safety briefings on lifting, getting on and off rear steps, traffic hazards, and more.
- Most importantly, support your collectors when they find an over-weight or over-sized container.

Department Supervisors

Collectors have the most immediate impact on their safety:

- Come to work prepared; hydrated, nourished, and warmed up.
- Tip each can to test its weight before fully committing to lifting the container into the truck.
- Assist coworkers with heavy containers or awkward items. Don't wait to be asked, take the initiative.
- Follow your department's procedures for reporting oversized or overweight containers. Take the time to educate the public on any ordinance or rules. The back you save may be your own.