



NORTH CENTRAL TEXAS COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS (NCTCOG)

Resource Paper: Securing Support

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Introduction

For an organics waste diversion program to be successful, it must be embraced and valued by the community that it serves. Without strong foundational support and community buy-in, even the best-designed organics recycling programs can fail to reach their potential. In contrast, a program with ongoing support can lead to higher participation rates, greater landfill diversion, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and healthier local soils through increased compost application. This resource paper explores strategies to enhance support and participation through three phases:

1. Prelaunch listening and message development
2. Program launch and implementation
3. Program scaling to maintain and expand participation

Background

Before a municipality can begin their engagement, it is important to determine what a successful program looks like through measurable goal setting. Establishing a clear vision of success will serve as the foundation for both internal planning and external communications. This discussion should happen during the early planning phases and continue well in advance of program launch as new challenges and objectives emerge.

When selecting goals for the program, they should reflect community values, priorities, and needs. Common key performance indicators (KPIs), or quantifiable measures to evaluate success, include participation rates, contamination thresholds, tons of diverted materials, and cost savings achieved. KPIs help develop a pathway to success, guide internal decision-making, and provide a means for tracking and communicating progress. Additional goal-setting recommendations are provided in the [Procurement Process Guidance Document](#).

Once selected, goals should be communicated early and often. Messaging and outreach strategies should align with what matters most to residents and future program participants, such as economic savings, environmental stewardship, or simply regulatory compliance. Measurable metrics can also be shared with residents, elected officials, and funding partners through communication strategies to help build credibility and show transparency on progress being made. When people are shown the impact of their individual actions on the system and the overall success of the program, they are more likely to participate and remain engaged. Strategies and best practices for messaging are further discussed in the next section.

Phase 1: Prelaunch Listening and Message Development

Before developing the program, it is important to understand the needs and priorities of the community and tailor the program accordingly. This involves creating strategies to engage stakeholders through clear, relevant, and engaging outreach materials. Taking this step early helps generate initial interest and support for the program ahead of its launch.

Listen & Build Momentum

A thoughtful and strategic engagement plan to gather community input should be developed prior to launching an organics waste recycling program. A strong foundation of shared understanding and accountability will be the launchpad for meaningful and sustainable behavior change. This begins with listening and gathering input from residents, elected officials, and community organizations to better understand local priorities, values, and concerns. Questions to begin thinking about and plan to ask stakeholders include:

- ✓ What does organics recycling mean to residents? Are most community members familiar with this concept?
- ✓ How many residents currently compost? What methods or organizations do they use?
- ✓ Are residents familiar with curbside, drop-off, or other organics recycling programs that the municipality is seeking to implement?
- ✓ Are there any concerns with organics recycling, such as cost, odor control, or pests?
- ✓ What are the motivators and barriers for participation?
- ✓ How do residents best receive information?



Answering these questions ensures that program facilitators are viewing implementation holistically, considering all angles, and aligning the program and messaging with the realities of the community it serves.

To gather this information, a multi-pronged outreach approach should be implemented to reach a wide array of audiences. This may include an online and paper survey, focus groups and listening sessions, and pop-up booths at community events. Additionally, various channels of communications should be utilized to spread awareness, such as social media, mailers, neighborhood canvassing, workshops, and collaboration with local schools and events. Materials should be provided in various languages to equitably reflect the community's diversity and reach the greatest number of residents. The photo to the right provides an example survey and outreach graphic to gather community input on food and yard waste for the City of Rochester.

This outreach and listen period allows residents to ask questions, voice concerns, and express ownership of the organics recycling program to come. Additionally, it serves as an opportunity to raise awareness, educate, and generate enthusiasm from future participants. [Table 1](#) summarizes common collection and outreach methods to consider during the pre-launch phase.

Table 1: Pre-Launch Outreach Methods

OUTREACH METHOD	IDEAS FOR IMPLEMENTATION	SUGGESTED TIMING
Community Survey	Distribute virtual surveys via email lists, social media, and QR codes at public places, and provide paper surveys upon request.	First step to listen and establish baseline understanding.
Focus Groups / Listening Sessions	Partner with local organizations, such as neighborhood groups and churches, to host conversations with residents. Consider providing multilingual sessions and/or childcare to provide equitable access to all community members.	Following the survey to dig deeper into survey findings.
Mailers / Postcards	Send introductory program information, invitations to listening sessions, and survey links. Consider providing mailers in diverse languages.	Early phase method to build awareness and invite input.
Pop-Up Booths / Community Events	Table at community events such as farmers markets and festivals to meet residents where they're at and gather input in real time.	Throughout prelaunch to provide program visibility and feedback.
Social Media Campaigns	Promote surveys, listening sessions, and early program information by utilizing social media targeted posts and advertisements.	Throughout prelaunch. Social media is low cost and broad.
Virtual Webinars	Host informational webinars to introduce program goals, answer early questions, and collect feedback.	Mid-prelaunch to supplement once awareness has been established.

Develop Community-Informed Messaging

Equipped with an understanding of residents' viewpoints and concerns, municipalities should incorporate feedback into the program structure and refine outreach mechanisms and messaging in ways that best resonate with the community.

The new communications strategy should incorporate community motivators for organics recycling. This includes stressing the importance of organics recycling by connecting individual actions to large environmental, economic, and community benefits, depending on which the community resonates with most. For example, messaging could highlight how composting reduces landfill use, lowers greenhouse gas emissions, and supports local soil health. The objective is to show residents tangible outcomes of their efforts and how it aligns with priorities and values shared during the listening phase.

Messaging should also acknowledge and address barriers or concerns that were previously learned. For example, concerns with pests and odors should be paired with actionable tips for addressing them, and financial hesitations should be addressed with details behind the program's cost-effectiveness. Proactively acknowledging and addressing these concerns builds credibility and alleviates hesitations that may prevent participation.

Finally, by understanding the diversity of the community and how they most receptively receive information, program facilitators should fine tune the tone and leverage the best delivery channels to reach mass audiences. It is critical that materials reflect the diversity of the community and are intentionally designed to reach a broad audience. This includes using inclusive language, culturally relevant imagery and examples, and providing materials in as many languages as appropriate for your community. Additionally, understanding how different demographics receive and trust information will guide the use of communication channels, such as mailers, fliers, social media, and local radio. Working with communication specialists and tailoring messaging to what resonates best demonstrates that the program facilitators are listening and considering what residents voiced during the listening phase.

Case Studies

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for pre-launch success. Each community has unique needs that require different tools to build awareness, gather input, and design programs that align with local values and priorities. The cities of Portland, Maine and Albuquerque, New Mexico have different approaches that similarly prioritize listening, relationship-building, and iterative planning before launching full-scale.

PORTLAND, MAINE

The City of Portland [piloted a year-long community composting drop-off program](#) before curbside rollout in April of 2021. This tactic helped to raise awareness of the issues with food waste and provided an opportunity to test program operations. By providing residents with accessible composting opportunities at community gardens and the Riverside Recycling Center, community members embraced the program. In fact, staff surveyed over 400 participants and reported overwhelming popularity and praise for the convenient drop-off sites.

This pilot program served multiple purposes:

- ✓ Raised awareness by providing participants with composting experience.
- ✓ Tested logistics and collections which helped staff identify challenges such as bin maintenance and scheduling.
- ✓ Built momentum and community trust which enabled the city to collect valuable feedback before committing to the full-scale program launch.

The greatest strength from Portland's pilot program is in its timing, as it provided program facilitators the opportunity to gather data, collect feedback, refine operations, address any challenges, and fine tune messaging based on real-world experience. Additional information is available on the [City of Portland's Community Composting Program webpage](#).



ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

Recognizing the importance of two-way conversations and listening to residents, the City of Albuquerque set out on a [pre-launch "Listening Tour"](#) through various communication methods from November 2023 to February 2024. This included drawing nearly 60 attendees through live listening sessions at libraries, cultural centers, and farms, engaging with 80 additional participants through pop-up events at public venues such as the Botanic Garden, and receiving 74 responses through an online feedback survey. The survey provided valuable information for their organics recycling program development, such as the community's preference for curbside service with supplemental drop-off opportunities, threshold of \$11/month for service, and support for a compost buy-back program. Key concerns with odors, pests, and contamination risks were also highlighted alongside the importance of equitable access and cost-effectiveness.

This engagement phase served numerous critical purposes:

- ✓ Ensured alignment with community needs and preferences.
- ✓ Built relationships and trusts by facilitating two-way conversations in culturally relevant environments.
- ✓ Informed program design decisions regarding service models, pricing structures, and implementing ongoing education and outreach.

Additional information is available on the [City of Albuquerque's From Food Waste to Fertile Soil: City's Food Waste to Compost Hub Pilot webpage](#).



Phase 2: Program Launch and Implementation

Once the program has been officially launched, the focus shifts from preparing residents to enrolling individuals and supporting their participation. The first months of implementation are critical times to build good habits, reinforce excitement, and ensure that residents feel equipped with the knowledge and resources they need to properly participate.

Welcome Kits & Incentives for Proper Participation

Welcome kits are an effective strategy for new enrollees to encourage participation and ensure access to the necessary tools and materials for successful participation. This package of resources and information can differ depending on availability of items and funding but should at the very least include educational material reiterating the purpose of the program, the structure of the program, and how to properly participate in the program. Some welcome kits go a step further and provide a counter-top food scrap container, a roll of compostable bags, clear and visually engaging guides, stickers or magnets, and a welcome letter reinforcing the community's goals.

Incentives can play a powerful role in encouraging initial enrollment as well as reinforcing positive behaviors throughout the program. These provide a sense of accomplishment for contributors, foster a sense of shared responsibility, and help maintain momentum and continued participation. The more direct forms of incentives involve rewarding proper source separation and can happen in a variety of ways depending on program resources and community priorities. Recognizing community members who consistently dispose of clean and contaminated-free organics waste in their containers could receive cart tags acknowledging their good behavior, receive public recognition through newsletters and social media, or receive monetary incentives such as coupons for gardening centers or free or discounted finished compost. These incentives go a step beyond securing participation as they encourage proper participation and lead to less contamination.

While source separation incentives are impactful, general participation incentives can certainly help boost participation, maintain enthusiasm, and foster a sense of community pride around composting. General participation incentives could include providing small rewards, such as reusable tote bags, compost liners, or compost giveaway, for being involved in the program or attending specialty events such as educational workshops. Ultimately, incentives should align well with the values and community desires that surfaced during the initial listening phase and complement the educational aspects of the program. Intentionally integrating incentives into the program structure can help to turn early participation into sustained and enthusiastic engagement while ensuring the quality of material collected.



Consistent Messaging, Visibility, and Clear Communication Channels

Maintaining consistent and transparent communication with program participants through regular updates on the program's progress is a key strategy to sustain participation. Ongoing engagement helps reinforce the program's credibility, strengthen good habits, address any emerging challenges, and signify that the program is an active collaboration between the community and program facilitators. If communication and outreach diminish after program launch, participation rates may remain stagnant or decline as participants feel disconnected or unclear on how to stay involved.

A clear and proactive communication plan should detail how, when, and where information will be shared regularly. Outreach methods could include newsletters, social media updates, mailers, and community bulletin boards to ensure broad reach. Celebrating early accomplishments, no matter how small, assists with building community pride and reinforcing the importance of individual contributions. This includes progress on the KPIs developed in the pre-launch phase, such as tons of organic waste diverted from landfills, participation rates, or uses of finished compost. Visual tools such as photos and short videos are effective in helping residents realize the impact of their efforts in an accessible and engaging format. This is also an opportunity to address any concerns early on. Remaining

transparent about contamination rates and providing support and guidance can help residents feel empowered to continue participating.

During this time, program facilitators should continue to be visible and present at community events and gatherings. By periodically attending farmers markets, neighborhood fairs, school functions, and more, residents are provided with opportunities to discuss the program, ask questions, request resources, and maintain face-to-face connections. Intentional touchpoints help keep the program relevant and ensure participants are invested in its success. It is also important to maintain a clear channel of communication for the public for dealing with issues and questions as they arise. Several points of contact should be easily accessible so that if a participant has questions or needs assistance, they know exactly who to contact. Responding promptly to feedback demonstrates that the program values its participants and is a collaborative effort.

Maintaining clear and consistent communication and visible community engagement illustrates the reliance on a successful collaborative relationship to make the program successful. Additional engagement, incentives, and ambassador strategies, including through collaborations with haulers and composters, are provided in [Table 2](#).



Table 2: Engagement, Incentives, and Ambassador Strategies

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION / PURPOSE	PARTICIPATION SUPPORT
Establish Periodic Communications	Deliver updates through newsletters, social media, mailers, or public postings at regular intervals.	Reinforce messaging, celebrate program successes, and keep program goals top of mind for participants.
Facility Tours	Partner with local organizations or provide monthly organics recycling facility tours as an educational opportunity.	Giving participants a glimpse into the composting process can make them feel closer to the program and understand why their role is so important within it.
Leverage Local Ambassadors	Identify local community members to serve as program ambassadors or “Block Leaders.”	Training individuals in the community to be ambassadors helps to disperse responsibility and leverage community members who may have influence.
Partner with Neighborhood Groups	Collaborate with neighborhood associations, local faith groups, or other cultural organizations to co-host events, workshops, or simply help spread messaging.	Existing networks help amplify program messaging further in areas where trust has already been established.
Participation Incentives	Offer rewards for general program participation in the form of coupons, compost giveaways, or public recognition.	Incentives help to motivate residents, build program ownership, and encourage long term participation.
Source Separation Incentives	Provide recognition to program participants with consistently clean and contamination-free material loads in the form of discounted trash fees, grants, or access to pilot programs.	Providing source separation incentives promotes high quality material recovery, reduces contamination, and highlights participant accountability.
Tabling at Community Events	Staff tables or booths at fairs, school events, markets, and other events provide additional touchpoints for residents.	Remaining present in the community keeps the program relevant and visible and provides an opportunity to connect and address questions in real time.



Case Studies

Recognition and consistent messaging are standard practice across successful organics waste recycling programs nationally. Two unique case examples for the City of Napa, California and Montgomery County, Maryland are provided.

NAPA, CALIFORNIA

The City of Napa launched a recognition program titled Compost Crew to honor recycling and composting champions and trailblazers in the community. Recognized entities receive a Compost Crew window decal as a visible symbol of their commitment. Additionally, recognized entities are featured prominently on the city's official website and social media channels, and are acknowledged during various municipal events.

The city recognizes that the shift to composting properly is difficult but utilizes the Compost Crew program to reinforce the message that effective composting is achievable. This recognition initiative complements Napa's comprehensive and ongoing outreach efforts, which include compost giveaway events, guided tours of composting facilities, educational presentations in schools, and the annual JD Fullner Recycling Leadership Awards. Additional information is available on the City of Napa's [Compost Crew Recognition Program webpage](#).

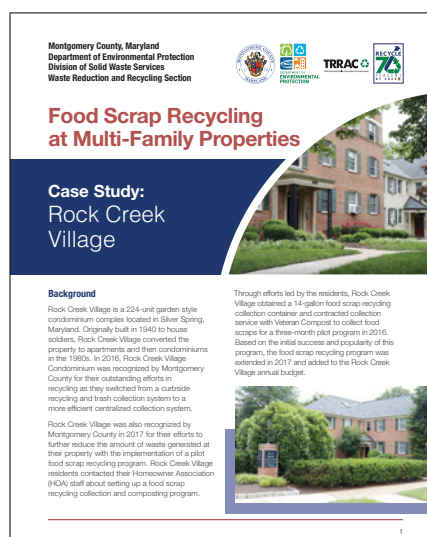


MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND

Montgomery County's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) annually recognizes waste diversion champions in the community, including residents, volunteer groups, multi-family properties and businesses. Recognitions are publicly shared on the County's DEP website, newsletters, press releases, and community events.

A notable example is Rock Creek Village, a 224-unit condominium community that diverted approximately 23,400 pounds of food scraps in 2024 through its composting program. The DEP [featured Rock Creek Village's accomplishments](#) across multiple platforms, citing their efforts to integrate composting into their resident-run garden, organize a community swap, and host a "salad event" to share composting and gardening tips. In addition to public recognition, the DEP developed a case study highlighting the property's implementation process, educational strategies, and lessons learned. This resource serves as a model for other multi-family communities seeking to adopt similar practices.

By publicly acknowledging efforts such as those at Rock Creek Village, the County fosters continued participation, promotes peer-to-peer learning, and cultivates a collaborative environment that supports the expansion of composting programs across the region. Additional information is available on Montgomery County's [Food Scraps \(Food Waste\) Recycling webpage](#).



Phase 3: Maintain And Expand Participation

As the program moves from the launch phase into a steadier operation, resources should shift to sustaining participation, adjusting the program through participant feedback, and preparing for strategic expansion. Enhancing participation at this stage includes nurturing early momentum, reinforcing good habits, expanding access and visibility, and doing so in ways that make the program feel permanent, community-owned, and worth investing in.

Enhancing Participation & Setting the Stage for Growth

Communities should continue to maintain consistent messaging and visibility as discussed in Phase 2, while incorporating additional strategies to make program participants feel seen, supported and celebrated for their efforts. Publicly sharing success stories or metrics can help strengthen community pride and demonstrate collective progress. Recognizing areas of the community with low contamination rates or exceptionally high participation rates through social media shout outs or newsletters gives residents a sense that their individual actions contribute to the collective's progress. Continuing to remain visible and available in the community means showing up at events, staying active on social media or websites, and being available to address questions as they arise. By remaining present, participants see that the program is here to stay and are more likely to get involved.

Friction points preventing greater participation should additionally be identified and removed. If residents are confused about what is accepted, how to control odor, or where to get compostable liners, they are more likely to disengage or opt out of the program. If left unaddressed, these barriers can erode participant enthusiasm over time. To respond effectively, program facilitators should regularly review feedback from residents to identify common questions and emerging themes. This data can help shape targeted messaging to address these themes in an engaging way. For example, if odors are a persistent issue for participants, messaging could include seasonal tips for maintaining clean and odor-free bins. In addition to reviewing feedback from residents, facilitators should concurrently evaluate the tools and resources that the program provides. Ensuring that tools are updated and aligned with the community's needs can prevent frustration and lack of interest and encourage long-term commitment.



Ongoing Program Evaluation

Program facilitators should consider establishing regular times for reviewing feedback and integrating it into program updates. Developing formal tools such as annual surveys will complement the informal feedback obtained from other communication channels. Surveys can be used to check in on participant satisfaction, understanding, and any barriers. Working with community partners to distribute or advertise surveys can maximize accessibility. Other options for less resource intensive tools that provide a steady stream of real-time input include QR codes to short polls on outreach materials, comment boxes at events, or open response forms on the program's webpage. Surveys can also follow the outreach and listening strategies provided in Phase 1.

Regular review of program feedback ensures that evaluation is a continuous improvement loop. For example, if many residents are confused about what items are accepted for organics waste recycling, the program could respond by updating printed guides, sending out reminder emails, or adding clarifying signage to collection areas or carts. Reviewing feedback will also provide insight into what outreach strategies are successful and what communities may be unintentionally neglected.

Reaching New Communities and Scaling Up

Reviewing feedback helps to adjust existing strategies and illuminate areas for potential growth and improvement. As patterns and gaps in participation become clear, feedback may highlight communities that were not effectively reached during program launch. Identifying these areas provides an opportunity for targeted outreach and messaging that works well for these residents. This phase of program growth is both an equity imperative and a practical step toward greater diversion, deeper engagement, and long-term program sustainability. Equipped with a strengthened foundation, trusted community relationships, and real time feedback, scaling up can be thoughtful and inclusive.

Scaling may also mean developing new relationships and collaborating with similar-minded groups. For example, community gardens can play a strong role as advocates for organics recycling, since they produce generous amounts of organic waste and can utilize compost at their plots. They may work with the program by hosting a booth at their garden to highlight the beneficial uses of compost for the environment and their crops and further spread the word to their friends and peers. Additional partnerships serve to pool resources and networks and reach previously untapped communities.



Case Study

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

The City of Minneapolis' curbside organics program demonstrates a successful approach to tailored outreach in support of underrepresented communities. The program rolled out in 2015 and saw participation grow steadily from 27% in mid-2015 to nearly 44% by the end of 2017 through direct outreach.

The city implemented a [door-to-door outreach campaign](#) to address disparities, utilizing trained interns and staff to visit thousands of households in areas with lower enrollment rates and offer real time information, address questions, distribute resources, and apply cart stickers. The effort proved to be successful, with 36% of engaged households choosing to sign up for the composting program in 2017. This success demonstrates the importance of meeting people where they are at and the effectiveness of personal connection.

While this effort was labor intensive, it helped to reinforce credibility, improve awareness, and overcome barriers that other outreach methods weren't reaching. Hyper-localized, face-to-face engagement, coupled with consistent messaging and strong program infrastructure can lead to improved participation rates and higher quality of material. Additional information can be found at the [City of Minneapolis' Organics Recycling webpage](#).



Conclusion

Effective community participation in organics recycling requires ongoing outreach and engagement by the municipality. This includes actively listening to residents to understand their motivators and concerns, providing accessible and inclusive avenues for back-and-forth communication, developing materials that resonate with communities, and addressing disparities in participation amongst different groups. As outlined in this resource paper, these efforts should be incorporated prior to program launch and continued well throughout the program. Continuing to keep residents' voices heard and maintaining clear and transparent communication will be key to ensuring the success of the organics recycling program.

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