

LET'S WORK TOGETHER

Addressing the Labor Shortage in Solid Waste Collection Services



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September 2022 Update

SWANA
SOLID WASTE ASSOCIATION OF NORTH AMERICA

UPDATE: COMPETITION FOR WORKERS CAUSING COLLECTION DELAYS — COMMUNITIES SHOULD BE FLEXIBLE AND CONSIDER OPTIONS

The Problem

Hiring and retaining drivers and helpers for solid waste and recycling collection services remains a challenge for many public and private sector service providers. More than two years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many solid waste employers continue to struggle with employee shortages in meeting customers' service needs and contractual obligations. Ongoing competition with employers in other industries and pressure to increase wages now heightened by US economic conditions have contributed to substantial delays in collection services in many US communities during Spring/Summer 2022.

Causes

Truck driver shortages have been well documented.¹ Early in the pandemic, the shortages were attributed to a combination of factors including:

- A COVID-19 spurred shift to work-from-home that caused:
 - Increased residential waste and recyclable tonnages, driving up demand for residential collection services
 - Growth in online shopping and home delivery services
- An aging work force moving more rapidly than expected to retirement, including front-line drivers²

However, other more recent factors are also contributing to competition for drivers and shortages in driver availability overall:

- More stringent federal requirements on entry-level commercial driver's license (CDL) drivers taking effect³
- Other industries paying higher wages⁴
- The minimum wage increasing in many states in 2022⁵



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¹ American Trucking Association, Driver Shortage Update 2021 (October 25, 2021). According to the ATA, there is currently a shortage of 80,000 drivers in the United States, and if that trend continues, the shortage will increase to 160,000 in 2030.

² This is often referred to as "the Great Resignation," and is not limited to drivers of heavy-duty trucks. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/some-jobs-are-just-made-for-the-great-resignation-11646339238> (March 3, 2022).

³ <https://www.fleetowner.com/news/regulations/article/21215930/new-driver-training-regulations-take-effect-monday> (February 4, 2022).

⁴ In April 2022, Wal-Mart announced the annual starting salary for long-haul drivers would increase to \$95,000-120,000. Other large transportation and warehouse companies are also raising wages.

⁵ Nearly half of US states increased their minimum wage in 2022, and 13 states will be increasing it in 2023.

Consequences

During Spring/Summer 2022, many public and private sector waste and recycling collection service providers had difficulty providing services at pre-COVID-19 levels. In some communities, companies with exclusive franchises and/or collection contracts left trash and/or recyclables uncollected at curbside for weeks leading to complaints from residents and elected officials.⁶

SWANA Research

SWANA's Applied Research Foundation (ARF) published a report on this topic in February 2020, *Recruiting Personnel for Solid Waste Collection Services*. This report addressed the pre-COVID driver shortage issue faced by waste and recycling collection service providers.⁷

In 2021, SWANA surveyed its ARF Collection Research Group subscribers⁸ regarding COVID-19's impact on their ability to provide collection services and found:

- Some public agencies temporarily cut back on services such as bulky waste pickup and yard waste collection.
- Some found it challenging to fill helper positions while driver recruitment continued to be a challenge as it was before COVID-19.
- Public agencies were using overtime pay, premium pay, outside contractors, temporary staff hires, and temporary staffing agencies to address labor shortages.

Some public agencies are successfully addressing the driver shortage issue by implementing new policies and hiring practices. For example, the city of San Antonio, TX is:

- Conducting an aggressive recruitment campaign with follow-up phone calls made to everyone who is interested
- Making more job offers than positions are available ("overhire offers")
- Providing referral bonuses to existing employees
- Observing more holidays
- Offering CDL training to helpers
- Helping drivers pass their DOT physicals



⁶ <https://www.wxyz.com/news/not-an-excuse-some-detroit-neighborhoods-experience-trash-pickup-delays-days-later> (August 11, 2022); <https://www.fox5dc.com/news/stafford-county-residents-upset-over-trash-pickup-delays> (Aug. 1, 2022); <https://why.org/articles/nj-towns-trash-pick-up-delays-republic-services/> (July 8, 2022); <https://news.yahoo.com/trouble-trash-eau-claire-residents-040100375.html> (July 15, 2022); <https://www.cantonrep.com/story/news/2022/06/29/kimble-says-nationwide-driver-shortage-causing-trash-collection-delays/7765124001/> (June 30, 2022).

⁷ SWANA members can download the report "Recruiting Personnel for Solid Waste Collection Services" free of charge from SWANA's website (<https://store.swana.org/store/detail.aspx?id=ARF20RPSWCS>).

⁸ The ARF Collection Research Group includes the following local governments: Charlotte, NC; Durham, NC; Tucson, AZ; Phoenix, AZ; Clearwater, FL; Miami-Dade County, FL; and Pensacola, FL.



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As a result, the city is approaching zero vacancies in its collection services for the first time in many years.⁹ Other private and public sector collection service providers are implementing similarly innovative processes to attract more drivers. For example, the City of Lubbock, TX is paying new employees to obtain their CDL from a local college.¹⁰ Both private haulers and public sector providers should consider incorporating these types of innovative best practices to address personnel shortages and ensure service continuity.

Short and Longer-Term Solutions

Service providers and the communities they serve should work collaboratively to develop flexible solutions to this issue. SWANA expects the challenges recruiting and retaining collection workers will extend beyond the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, local governments and their residents need to be willing to pay more for reliable residential solid waste collection in order to cover higher wages/benefits, the rising cost of new and cleaner trucks, and other operational cost increases.

SWANA suggests the following short-term solutions to minimize collection delays plaguing some communities and reduce the current shortage of waste and recycling collection employees:

- Temporarily reduce service frequencies for recycling and/or yard waste collection.
- Temporarily suspend curbside collection of yard waste and/or bulky waste.
- Expand the use of temporary workers and short-term contractors.
- Follow San Antonio's example by implementing new strategies such as conducting aggressive recruitment campaigns, making overhire job offers, providing referral bonuses, increasing worker holidays, offering CDL training, and assisting employees with passing DOT physicals.

Long-Term Solutions

Solid waste collection employers should:

- Consider increasing compensation, including signing bonuses, for driver and helper positions to make them more attractive to potential applicants.
- Promote industry jobs as recession resistant, long-term career opportunities.
- Evaluate technical solutions to improve routing efficiencies.
- Explore non-traditional labor pools, including female applicants and veterans.
- Consider utilizing automated collection trucks where feasible to reduce the need for helpers and improve worker safety.

⁹ Email correspondence from Josephine Valencia, Deputy Director-Solid Waste Department, City of San Antonio dated July 28, 2022.

¹⁰ <https://www.everythinglubbock.com/news/lubbock-solid-waste-department-paying-for-people-to-get-dumpster-truck-certification/> (August 11, 2022).



Communities that contract for waste and/or recycling collection services should:

- Consider renegotiating their contracts to reflect wage increases associated with driver and helper positions as well as reduced service levels caused by the labor shortage.
- Address the collection fee increases and/or changes to public sector budgets that may be needed to cover these additional costs.
- Consider whether bringing residential collection services in-house will reduce costs and/or provide more reliable service to residents.¹¹

SWANA will continue to provide assistance and guidance to municipal solid waste agencies and private sector companies seeking to address the labor shortage in solid waste collection. SWANA's new Strategic Plan, *Forward Together*, includes as a primary goal improving the attractiveness of the industry to prospective employees.

¹¹ A recent article states that an Arkansas county is considering this option when its current contract expires on July 31, 2023. http://www.magnoliareporter.com/news_and_business/local_news/article_ad1b2a40-1253-11ed-8e88-33a04391466c.html (August 2, 2022).



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