

# LET'S WORK TOGETHER

Addressing the Labor Shortage in Solid Waste Collection Services



## COLLABORATION IS KEY TO ADDRESSING THE CURRENT LABOR SHORTAGE

### *The Problem*

The hiring and retention of drivers and helpers to provide solid waste and recycling collection services is both a historical and growing challenge for public sector and private sector service providers. The scope of the challenge has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is making it very difficult for some employers, particularly in Florida, to attract drivers or helpers to meet customer service needs and contractual obligations.

### *Causes*

Truck driver shortages have been well documented<sup>1</sup> due to the strong economy and increased demand for trucking services caused in part by the substantial growth in online shopping and home delivery services. Additional causes include the aging workforce and more stringent driver requirements at the federal level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had substantial impacts on solid waste collection and has made it difficult for some companies and agencies to maintain service levels due to:

- Increased residential waste and recyclables tonnages;
- COVID illnesses, school closures, and the lack of affordable child-care options that require employees to stay at home. These impacts are being experienced by many other service industries, including the restaurant industry<sup>2</sup>;
- Extended unemployment benefits and stimulus checks that provide disincentives for workers to return to the workforce.

### *Consequences*

Both public and private sector collection service providers are facing increased difficulty hiring and retaining collection truck drivers and helpers. Some waste and recycling collection service providers are having difficulty providing services at pre-COVID-19 service levels.



*Miami-Dade County Department of Solid Waste Management*

### *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.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> American Trucking Association, *Truck Driver Shortage Analysis 2019* (July 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, B. "As Diners Return, Restaurants Face a New Hurdle: Finding Workers", *New York Times*, April 9, 2021; Hetrick, C., "Unemployment Remains High, Yet Many Businesses Say They Can't Find Enough Workers", *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 5, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> SWANA members can download the report "Recruiting Personnel for Solid Waste Collection Services" free of charge from SWANA's website.

SWANA recently conducted a survey of its ARF Collection Research Group subscribers<sup>4</sup> regarding COVID-19's impact on their ability to provide collection services and found that:

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

The Spring 2021 driver and helper shortages that are causing disruptions in the delivery of waste and recycling collection services in some communities are not the result of poor planning or management.<sup>5</sup>



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SWANA suggests the following solutions to the current labor shortage in waste and recycling collection:

### Short-Term Solutions

Service providers and the communities they serve should work collaboratively to develop flexible solutions to this issue through the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

- Temporarily reducing the collection service frequency for recycling and yard waste collection;
- Temporarily suspending the curbside collection of yard waste and/or bulky waste;
- Expanded use of temporary workers and aggressive outreach to potential employees, including via social media.

### Long-Term Solutions

- Solid waste collection employers should consider increasing compensation for driver and helper positions to make them more attractive to potential applicants;
- Solid waste collection employers should promote industry jobs as providing recession resistant, long-term career opportunities;
- Communities that contract for waste and recycling collection services may have to renegotiate their contracts to reflect wage increases associated with driver and helper positions or reductions in service levels needed to minimize budget impacts;
- Collection fee increases and/or increases to public sector budgets may be needed to cover these additional costs;
- Agencies and haulers should consider utilizing automated collection trucks where feasible to reduce workforce helper demands and improve worker safety.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Manch, R. "Waste Pro turning to employment agencies for help filling positions, but it's not that simple", Fox4 News Southwest Florida, April 15, 2021.



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