IMPACT IN PROGRESS
CASE STUDY

Proving What Works: When Education Leads, Does Behavior Follow?

Sahuarita, Arizona

Successful recycling programs start with access. But they don't succeed on access alone.

In August 2025, the town of Sahuarita, Arizona, transitioned from a subscription-based recycling model, where residents had to opt in to recycle, to a universal curbside program. Which means that now, every household has a 96-gallon cart for recycling and can participate in the town's recycling program.



The Recycling Partnership's best practices emphasize basic yes and no instructions, realistic illustrations, plain language, and multilingual communications that have been tested for effective education and outreach.

That's just the beginning. Access is critical, but it doesn't drive participation on its own. Residents need to know what to do and why it matters. That's where outreach makes the difference.

With support from The Recycling Partnership (The Partnership), Sahuarita is launching a robust education and outreach campaign alongside cart delivery. Backed by a grant that invests $2.50 per household (more than double the national average).

What We're Testing

Sahuarita is the latest project in The Partnership's national effort to identify what truly drives behavior change. This project is testing a key question: Can greater investment in outreach lead to stronger participation and cleaner recycling from day one? The outreach strategy draws from more than a decade of applied research led by The Partnership and this campaign is built to inform, engage, and empower residents before and during the launch of their new curbside service.

Why It Matters

Every year, millions of recyclable materials still end up in landfills, not only because of a lack of infrastructure, but also because of confusion and low participation. The Partnership's State of Recycling Report shows that 41% of households with access to recycling do not participate. This project is an opportunity to better understand:

- How early, high-touch outreach affects participation and material quality
- What approaches work best for mid-sized communities
- How future programs can scale smarter, community-centered outreach

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Key Impacts

- Distribution of 14,000 96-gallon curbside recycling carts
- $2.50 per household invested in education and outreach, more than double the typical spend
- Layered education strategy, including direct mail, information packets with carts, and custom messaging depending on outcomes
- Ongoing community-level data collection to assess capture and contamination



What's Next

Carts are rolling out. Outreach is active. The Partnership will track and analyze progress across key performance indicators in the months ahead.

And like projects before it, the lessons learned in Sahuarita will inform national strategy, helping other communities launch smarter, more effective recycling programs from the start.