

# **GUIDE TO MULTIFAMILY RECYCLING**

**Lessons from Communities and  
Tools to Promote Recycling  
for Multifamily Properties**



# Introduction

**With more than 22 million American households calling multifamily properties home, communities dedicated to improving recycling participation must have strategies for reaching beyond single-family homes.** Within multifamily properties – many of which are apartment buildings – more than 13 million households in America do not have access to onsite recycling opportunities.

While communities across the country have begun committing to waste-reduction goals and prioritizing recycling, some have emerged on the forefront of determining effective ways to promote and increase multifamily recycling participation. This guide features the experiences and lessons learned from Orlando, Florida, which has a significant proportion of multifamily properties and has set a goal to become a zero-waste community by 2040, and Tacoma, Washington, which is striving to divert 70% of its solid waste from landfills by 2028.

**Multifamily recycling programs often pose unique challenges due to lack of systems for collection, mixed levels of awareness from property managers and residents, and logistics around available space. But with more than 80% of Americans saying that recycling is a valuable service, demand for recycling access is high.**

“We need to make recycling as easy as – or easier than – waste disposal and give access to those who don’t have it,” says Craig Wittig, Director of Community Programs at The Recycling Partnership. “Focusing on multifamily recycling is especially important as we make a purposeful effort to improve equity in residential recycling.”

This guide also includes a toolkit of customizable resources and templates for communities to use in their own outreach to multifamily property owners, managers and residents. While municipalities, property managers and community leaders continue to pilot strategies and evaluate what works in multifamily recycling, this guide provides a starting point for consideration of best practices and tips from communities that have begun this work.

**“We need to make recycling as easy as – or easier than – waste disposal and give access to those who don’t have it...”**

**- Craig Wittig**

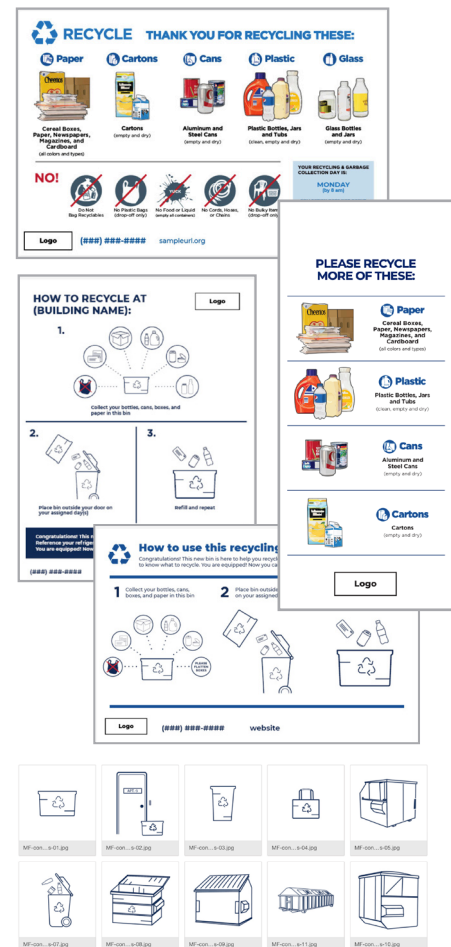
**Director of Community Programs,  
The Recycling Partnership**

# The Recycling Partnership's Multifamily Recycling Toolkit

## Easy-to-Implement Messaging Assets

The materials provided in this toolkit have been designed so that communities of any size can utilize them. Messaging is tailored to residents, including information on how to use the recycling bin according to various multifamily setups, and how to sort common items as recyclables or trash. Communities should assess which materials will be of greatest use based on previous successes and staffing expertise. You are welcome to use all of the materials, or to select the ones that work best for your program. Below is a list of the assets in the kit that can be customized (including icons and information about acceptable materials, contact, and logos) and used in your community to help conduct outreach for multifamily properties:

- **Infocards** – Both standard infocards and infocards with call-out box for days of doorstep service can help serve as a visual aid to show residents which items are recyclable and which are not. These can be distributed as an email attachment or printed.
- **Postcard with recycling instructions** – This postcard provides a step-by-step set of instructions to show residents how to recycle, using the appropriate receptacle.
- **Full-page flyer with recycling instructions** – This version is printable on standard 8.5” x 11” paper, with step-by-step instructions on how to recycle.
- **Door hanger** – These can be placed on residents’ doors as a highly visible way to spread awareness and invite residents to participate in a new recycling program.
- **Recycling container illustration set** – This will allow you to use icons and images that match your local needs (e.g. recycling bins v. totes)



# Inform Stakeholders

In some cases, such as the implementation of a new ordinance, it can be greatly beneficial to keep external and internal stakeholders informed of a campaign before its launch to build ambassadors and community buy-in. Communities can think through their internal and external stakeholders that may have an interest in or be impacted by this campaign. Below is a list of potential stakeholders:

## External

- Local Nonprofits or Citizen Engagement Groups

## Internal

- All Municipal Staff (employee newsletters are a great way to do this!)
- Customer Service or Call Center
- IT Departments
- Local Officials

## Audit and Update Your Community Website

In preparation for the launch of this campaign, update your recycling webpage with any new information about multifamily recycling. This landing page will need to be added to all of the assets. In order to prepare for the potential additional traffic, communities should ensure their webpages are up-to-date and as user-friendly as possible.

### Recommended community webpage updates

- Remove any outdated or unnecessary content
- As needed, include a link or tab that takes users directly to the recycling page from the homepage
- Use prominent visuals of your accepted materials on the page. Be sure to use the same images across all communications, including on the web and printed collateral
- Downloadable PDFs are great, but they should not be the only location for the accepted materials list
- If a recycle search bar or application is available, place it at the top of the page
- Make sure all information on your webpage is consistent
- Include asset images in slide shows or other locations

Informing your web team of the campaign in advance will help them prepare for potential edits they will need to make, help you track the traffic on your webpages, and alert them that there should be an increase in traffic to your webpage.

## Metrics/Measurement

Capturing metrics from the campaign is key to understanding the campaign's success and developing best management practices. Metrics can be captured for both the reach of communications and quantitative changes in the recycling stream.

Communications metrics are often measured by reach or interaction and should be included with any form of paid advertising or social media post. Communities can utilize several tools and tactics to capture these metrics:

- Coordinate with your web team or utilize Google Analytics to measure webpage and app traffic
- Set a schedule to review your social media insights and create a tracking method for them
- Continuously check-in with ad providers for a metrics report

### **Multifamily recycling metrics could include quantitative measurements of the quantity and quality of material that is collected in your recycling stream.**

Communities should explore how multifamily material can be isolated so that an accurate multifamily recycling rate can be determined. This could include establishing multifamily-property collection routes to measure effects on multifamily recycling, sampling material from multifamily collection routes or from collection containers, using an app to measure volume of recycling containers, measuring changes in recycling quantity through scheduled photographs of collection containers, or other options. [Contact The Recycling Partnership](#) to discuss potential strategies for measuring your impact.

**Free customizable infocards, postcards, door hangers, and recycling instructions for multifamily are now available.**

**Signup here: [recyclingpartnership.org/multifamily](https://recyclingpartnership.org/multifamily)**

# Implementing a New Ordinance in Orlando

In 2019, the City of Orlando passed an ordinance with broad support that required multifamily and commercial properties to institute measures to provide tenants access to recycling. In a phased approach starting with large multifamily and commercial properties and eventually extending to all multifamily properties over four years, the ordinance outlined three requirements—that properties must:

- Provide a container for recycling
- Coordinate collection of recyclable materials
- Submit a recycling verification form to the city annually

“Having an ordinance that mandated multifamily recycling has been the biggest key for us at the end of the day,” says Evan Novell, Sustainability Project Manager for the City of Orlando. “Also, we are fortunate in that most residents in Orlando want to recycle.”

Outreach to property managers even before the ordinance passed helped ensure that stakeholders had buy-in on the new requirements and reduced opposition to it, according to Novell. **“It’s important to start the work upfront and bring people into the process,”** he says.

**CÓMO RECICLAR EN (BUILDING NAME):** GREEN WORKS ORLANDO

1.   
 Llene este cubo con sus botellas, latas, cajas y papel.

2.   
 Lleve su cubo al recipiente para reciclar y vacíe sus artículos para reciclar en el recipiente.

3.   
 No sus

¡Felicitaciones! Este nuevo cubo le ayuda a reciclar correctamente. PARA SABER QUE MÁS RECICLAR consulte la tarjeta provista. Ahora puede despendiclar menos y reciclar más.

Busque más información sobre lo que puede reciclar en [www.orlando.gov/recycling](http://www.orlando.gov/recycling) ¡RECICLAR DA RESULTADO! Gracias por ayudar.

**CÓMO RECICLAR EN (BUILDING NAME):** GREEN WORKS ORLANDO

1.   
 Llene este cubo con sus botellas, latas, cajas y papel.

2.   
 Lleve su cubo al recipiente para reciclar y vacíe sus artículos en el recipiente.

3.   
 No deje de juntar y llevar sus artículos para reciclar.

¡Felicitaciones! Este nuevo cubo le ayuda a reciclar correctamente. PARA SABER QUE MÁS RECICLAR consulte la tarjeta provista. Ahora puede despendiclar menos y reciclar más.

Busque más información sobre lo que puede reciclar en [www.orlando.gov/recycling](http://www.orlando.gov/recycling) ¡RECICLAR DA RESULTADO! Gracias por ayudar.



**Early communication with property managers** also can help ease rollout of a new recycling program because many properties establish their fiscal budgets up to a year in advance. By engaging with property managers well before a compliance deadline, they can more easily incorporate a recycling plan into their future costs if needed.

With support through a grant from The Recycling Partnership, the city undertook significant efforts to ensure that implementation went smoothly in its first year. This work included hiring a full-time multifamily recycling project manager, developing educational materials, and conducting an in-depth waste and recycling audit on a select number of properties.

“The magnitude of this ordinance is huge, encompassing thousands of properties,” Novell says. “Spreading awareness about what can be recycled and working directly with property managers to provide training, education, and resources to set up their systems were especially important steps.”

**The Partnership and the City of Orlando worked throughout 2020 to expand the program to properties not recycling.** Efforts also included utilizing customized outreach materials to improve recycling at properties with already established programs and to bring new properties into the recycling system. Education and outreach materials were made available to all multifamily properties.

**Some of the biggest challenges to date have included overcoming property managers’ concerns about a lack of space for containers** needed for recycling collection and addressing misunderstandings about what is recyclable, which affects the potential for recycling contamination. The city also felt the full impact of the pandemic on their front-line essential workers – especially as those workers collected bags of trash and recycling from single family homes and multifamily properties every week. It was clear the community depended on city staff to keep waste and recycling moving during this time, especially as residents were generating more waste and recycling at home.

**The city provided consulting support directly to property managers through site visits and calls from a team of part-time seasonal interns to help devise solutions to issues and equip them with best-in-class educational materials for residents.**

Setting up the internship program helped expand the city’s ability to conduct outreach to properties effectively, especially in light of change to administrative processes and operations that occurred because of COVID-19.

“Education starts not only with residents, but with the property owners and managers as well,” says Mary Nitschke, Vice President of Sustainability for RealPage, Inc. and a veteran property management professional who has worked on establishing recycling programs at multifamily properties for roughly 20 years. Part of the challenge is that multifamily properties often require new infrastructure or enclosures, and misunderstandings may exist about the most cost-effective and efficient ways to set up containers, according to Nitschke.

**“Education starts not only with residents, but with the property owners and managers as well...”**

**- Mary Nitschke**

**Vice President of Sustainability,  
RealPage**

Resident turnover is also as high as 50% in multifamily properties, she says.

“Residents may learn how to recycle while living in one property, then take those habits into the next place they live, even if the system is different there. It’s really hard to change behavior once they’ve learned it.”

Clear signage has been especially effective in Orlando’s efforts to help people recycle properly and reduce contamination. The city also disseminated recycling totes to properties and thousands of printed info cards and bilingual instructional postcards for residents, as well as hundreds of letters to property managers. But “the signage on dumpsters has been the best single tool from the toolkit so far,” according to Novell.

Translating informational materials into Spanish posed a challenge during implementation, as materials went through multiple iterations based on how properties set up recycling and required multiple new translations and approvals.

One important way to communicate recycling information clearly across all languages is to use visuals, says Nitschke. “Anything people have to read will be thrown away immediately,” she says. “But a picture is worth a thousand words.”

These efforts are seeing results: **Orlando’s recycling program improved by adding recycling services to 21,491 multifamily units. And the increased participation in the city’s recycling program diverted an additional 1,110 new recycling tons from landfills during 2020.** In addition, relationships were made between the project team and the participating multifamily properties that will help the City’s recycling program for years to come.



## Key Takeaways:

- Early outreach to property owners and managers is extremely helpful in gaining support for an ordinance and ensuring a smooth rollout of new multifamily recycling programs
- Passing a local ordinance is a surefire way to institute community-wide multifamily recycling practices
- Expanded staff dedicated to multifamily recycling outreach can help ensure property managers are supported and have educational materials needed to operate their programs successfully
- Clear signage about what to recycle, especially posted at collection points, can help improve recycling quantity and quality

# Culturally Competent Communications in Tacoma, Washington

In 2008, the City of Tacoma, Washington, identified recycling as a priority and set a clear goal to divert 70% of its solid waste from landfills by 2028. Eight years later, the city reaffirmed its goal, and by 2015, a study of the city’s waste found that 55% was being diverted through recycling or composting – a significant sign of progress.

Yet the city recognized the need to continue improving recycling efforts and engage underserved communities to meet its goal, making multifamily properties an important focus of outreach. The 2015 waste study found that multifamily properties had only a 19% recycling rate, and that 70% of disposed waste from these properties was recoverable.

“We saw an opportunity to work on equitable access to recycling with multifamily residents while also developing a stronger relationship with property managers,” says Sam Lake, Waste Reduction Specialist for the City of Tacoma. “This was the first time we were able to reach out to multifamily properties in a focused and intentional way.”

The collage features several informational posters and a recycling bag:

- Recycle Right Poster:** Titled "Empty, Clean, and Dry", it lists acceptable items for recycling: Plastic (Bottles, Jugs, Tubs), Paper (Mixed Paper, Paperboard and Boxes, Flattened Cardboard), Metal (Aluminum Cans, Metal Cans), and Glass (Glass bottles and jugs). It also includes a "DROP-OFF" section for items not accepted for curbside recycling.
- GARBAGE Poster:** Lists items not accepted for curbside recycling, such as Paper Plates, Paper Cups, Plastic Cups, Plastic Utensils, Coffee Pods, Plastic Clamshell Containers, All Cartons, Foil Plastic Packaging, Frozen Food Containers, Pizza Boxes, Aluminum Foil, Styrofoam Containers, Prescription Bottles, and Shredded Paper.
- Why Recycle Right? Poster:** Explains that recyclables are not to be thrown out if they contain a fraction of garbage or dirty items. It highlights benefits like saving money and keeping Tacoma clean.
- Recycling Bag:** A blue bag with a blue handle, featuring "RECYCLING" and "GARBAGE" sections with icons and instructions in English, Korean, Vietnamese, and Russian.
- Informational Card:** Provides online information for "Recycle Right" at [tacomarecycles.org](http://tacomarecycles.org) and includes a QR code.

**The city set a goal to increase multifamily recycling accounts** and embarked on an intensive effort to educate property managers, understand the needs of multifamily residents, and create a suite of informative materials in a toolkit to address those needs.

The first step posed an early hurdle. **“The biggest challenge was getting correct contact information for property managers in the community, because of outdated or incorrect data,” Lake says. “Once we corrected that, we went into the field and interviewed property managers and collected their input on what they wanted to see in a program like this.”**

The initial version of the toolkit included a multifamily recycling guide, social media graphics, illustrated flyers, welcome packets for new residents, and other materials. The city also offered tote bags and weatherproof signs, and bin stickers. While this toolkit incorporated input from stakeholders including property managers, residents, and solid waste management staff, there was not a mechanism for measuring and evaluating its effectiveness. After receiving a grant from The Recycling Partnership, the City redoubled its efforts by amplifying the toolkit and auditing educational materials, testing it in the field and in focus groups.

**One of the biggest findings from this process was the great diversity of residents living in multifamily properties and the need to conduct outreach in a linguistically and culturally relevant way.** Roughly 19% of residents in Tacoma speak a language other than English at home, according to the U.S. Census.

**Three focus groups were conducted in Spanish, Russian and Vietnamese to learn, in detail, how to create toolkit items that would be effective.** Focus groups helped inform the kinds of content that were most needed, the types of toolkit materials that would be most helpful, and designs of flyers, guides, and other materials that would deliver information most effectively.

The result was an enhanced set of educational resources that properties could customize and provide to residents. And beyond English-language materials, the toolkit included transcreated versions in six different languages. More than just direct translations of text, the transcreated materials often used images that were specifically relevant to the target population. For example, the Vietnamese version of the multifamily recycling poster features not only Vietnamese text, but also pictures of popular Vietnamese food packages including a coconut milk can and fish sauce bottles as examples for what should be recycled.

“Pictures are important, but they have to be clear,” says Mary Nitschke, Vice President of Sustainability for RealPage, Inc. “If you’re showing a plastic bag, it must look like the ones residents see at their local grocery store, not generic, or it won’t be understood.”

Investing in focus groups and transcreation of materials is costly, says Craig Wittig, Director of Community Programs at The Recycling Partnership, “but the importance of adapting to residents’ needs and making the information not only accessible, but also relatable is imperative regardless of what language people speak or read in. Communities should consider and determine what is feasible for them to make their information accessible to all of their residents.”

**In addition to directing education toward residents, property managers were a key audience.** “A lot of property managers didn’t even know they were responsible for their waste area,” Lake says. So the toolkit was purposefully designed to make it easy for property managers to implement their programs and use the materials. The toolkit includes a recycling program checklist and directory of additional resources for property managers.

**Among the most popular resources property managers appreciated were digital items that could be emailed to tenants, according to Lake.** Since so much business and communication is already conducted online, including intranets and paying rent, it is a natural channel for sharing recycling information.

“We need to talk about pushing to digital,” says Nitschke, who was worked in property management for about 20 years. “The pandemic is going to create a new normal of digital signage and information, too.”

The city continues to evaluate the toolkit and survey property managers and residents to gauge their usefulness.

**A lot of property managers didn’t even know they were responsible for their waste area...”**

**- Sam Lake**

**Waste Reduction Specialist,  
City of Tacoma**

## Key Takeaways:

- Soliciting early input from target audiences, including property managers and residents, can help identify areas of confusion and information needed to educate around multifamily recycling practices effectively
- Translating materials is good, but transcreating materials is even better for making information as accessible as possible for diverse populations.
- Pictures that are locally and culturally relevant help enhance communication about what can and can't be recycled
- Digital assets, such as e-newsletter items and social media graphics, are easy-to-use for property managers who are already conducting a lot of business online with residents

## Stay Connected

Join The Recycling Partnership's City and County Recycling Coordinators Group to learn about what other communities are doing, share resources, and stay engaged:

 [www.facebook.com/groups/municipalrecyclingcoordinators](https://www.facebook.com/groups/municipalrecyclingcoordinators)

Visit [recyclingpartnership.org](https://recyclingpartnership.org) for more resources.

