MWMA Fall Summit

Moving the Needle: What Actually Changes Consumer Behavior

October 26, 2026

The Recycling Partnership

The Recycling Partnership is the U.S. nonprofit solving recycling's toughest challenges, together.

Introductions



Amy Thomaides

Assistant Director
City of San Marcos



Peter Nierengarten

Environmental Director
City of Fayetteville



Lydia Keenan

Community Strategy Manager
The Recycling Partnership

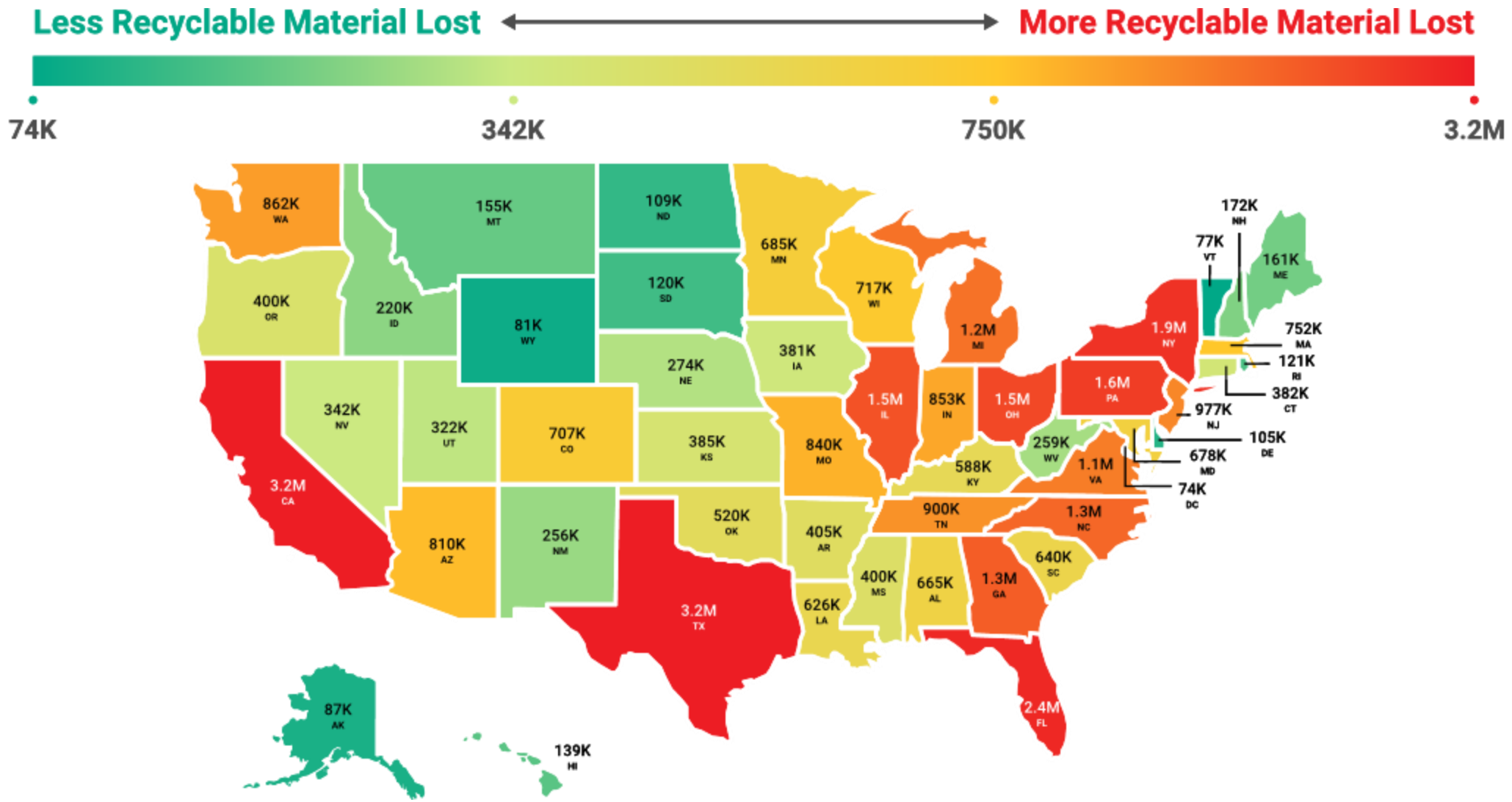


Kyra Levau

Grant Development Manager
The Recycling Partnership

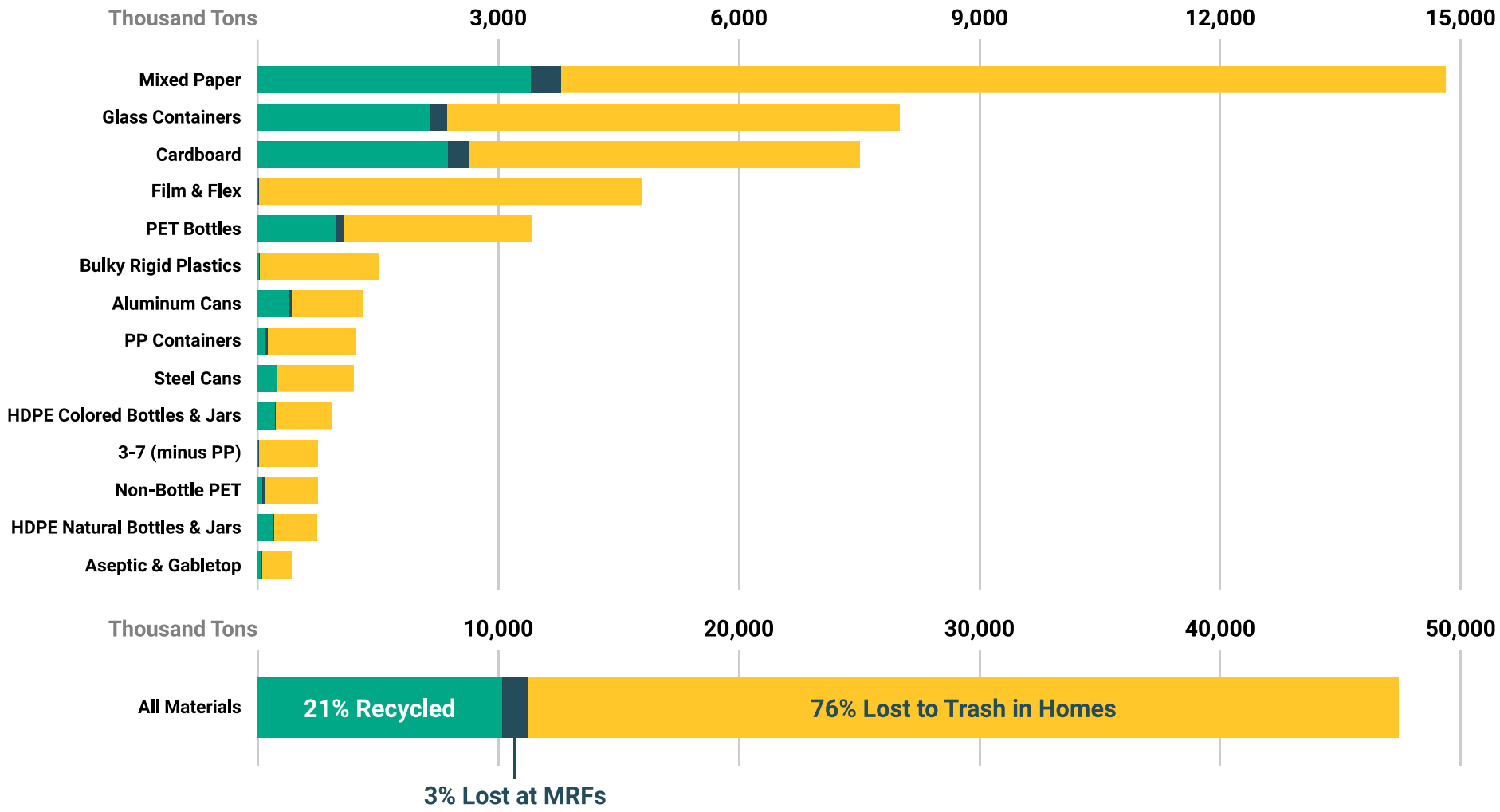
37 MILLION Tons of Recyclable Material Still Lost Each Year

(State-by-State Residential Recyclable Material Lost in Tons Per Year)



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76% of Residential Recyclables Are Lost to Trash In Homes.

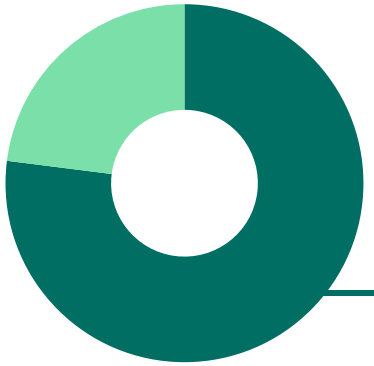


*Includes material captured through state deposit return systems

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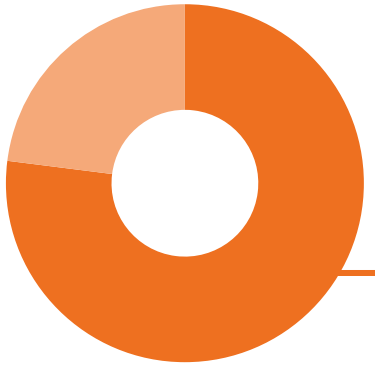
How Do We Overcome The Belief-behavior Gap?



77%

believe recycling makes a difference & has a positive impact.

81% say we are not doing enough as a society to combat wastefulness.

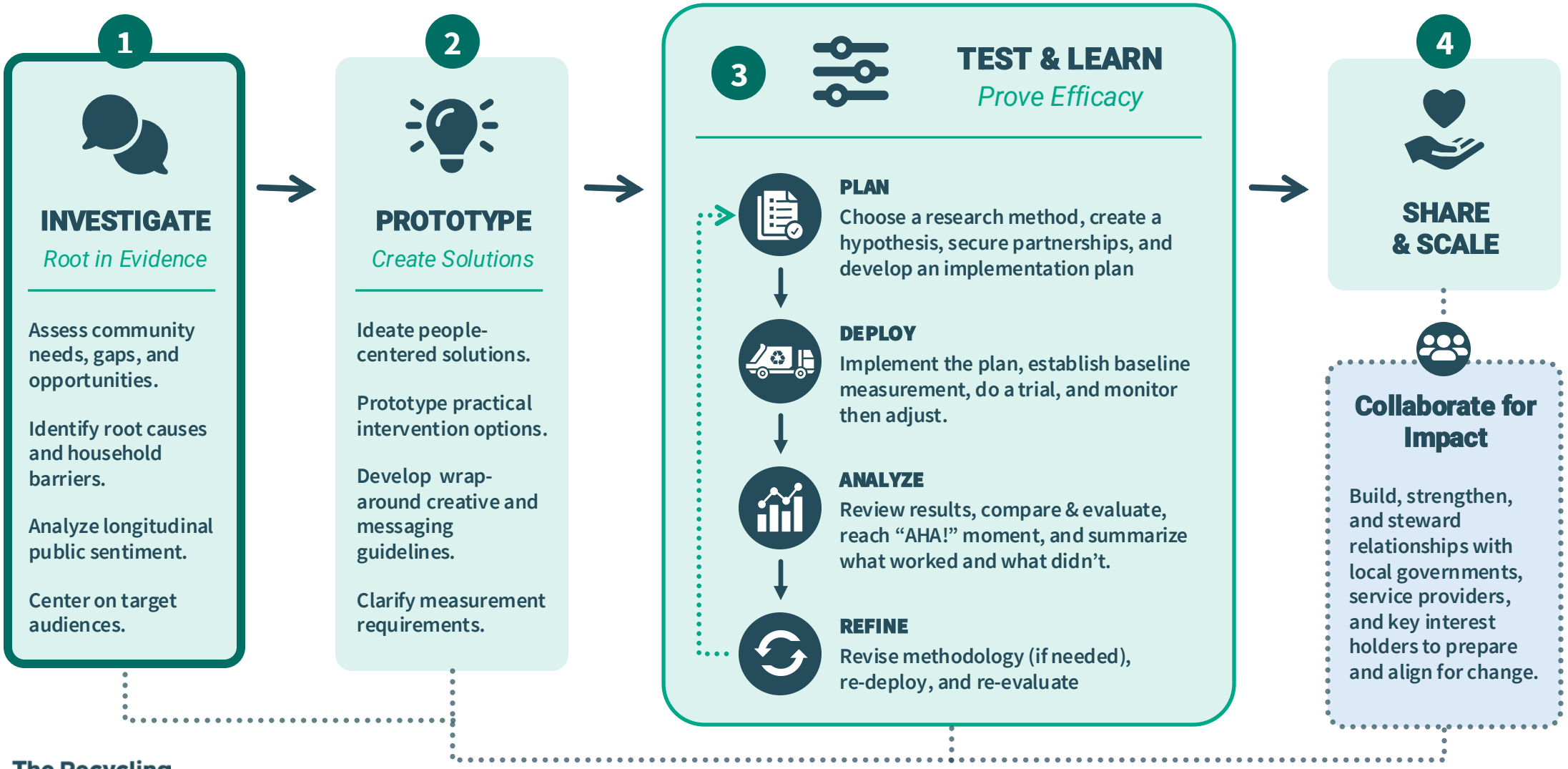


76%

of residential recyclables are lost to trash in homes.

Only 43% of U.S. households actively participate in a local recycling program.

Methodical Innovation to Improve Confidence, Participation, and Capture



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Foundational Research

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Our on-the-ground experience demonstrated the urgency for an evidence-backed approach to engagement.

No curbside access	Curbside Opt-in	Curbside bins	Curbside carts, no engagement	Curbside carts, good engagement
LOST 800 Lbs./Yr.	LOST 700 Lbs./Yr.	LOST 600 Lbs./Yr.	LOST 400 Lbs./Yr.	LOST 200 Lbs. /Yr.
CAPTURED 0 Lbs./Yr.	CAPTURED 100 Lbs./Yr.	CAPTURED 200 Lbs./Yr.	CAPTURED 400 Lbs./Yr.	CAPTURED 600 Lbs./Yr.
Add Access	Make Access Universal	Provide Carts	Engage Residents	Optimize Engagement

~800 Lbs. of recyclables available in Single Family HH / Yr.

Behavior Framework Development Inputs

Foundational Research

Responsive to Public Opinion, Perceptions, Motivations & Barriers:

- Audience Segmentation Research
- Recycling Confidence Index
- In-Home Ethnographies
- Labeling and Package Design-Focused Surveys
- +++

Models for Change

Grounded in Behavioral Science:

- Human-Centered Design
- BJ Fogg B=MAP
- Community Based Social Marketing
- Rare's Levers of Change
- +++

Community Grants & Pilots

Tested in Real-World Contexts:

- Intervention pilots in 240,000+ households across AR, CA, CT, FL, MI, OH, NJ, IN, and more!
- +++

2026 National Survey & Focus Groups

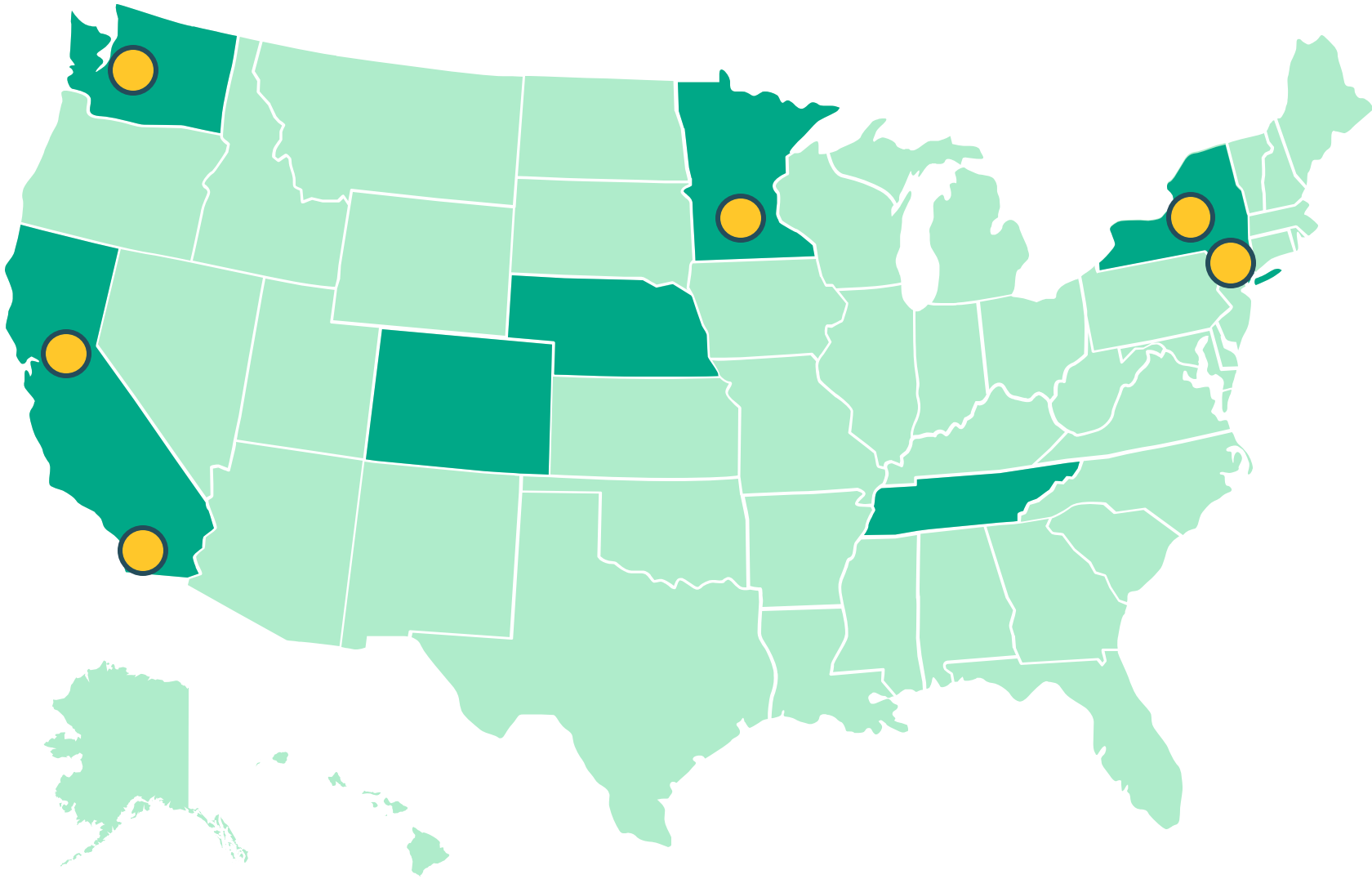
112 QUESTIONS

18-minute average

National sample of 5,717 interviews (Spanish & English)

Oversampling in key states for greater confidence

Focus groups in **NY** (Dec), **MN** (Jan), **WA** (Mar), and **CA** (Mar)



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Benchmarking American Sentiment and Behavior – The Recycling Confidence Index

A person's confidence in their **own self-efficacy, their local program,** *and* in the **performance of the recycling system** are crucial.

Programmatic Factors

538



Perception-based Factors

716

Programmatic Factors

554

+16

vs. 2022



Perception-based Factors

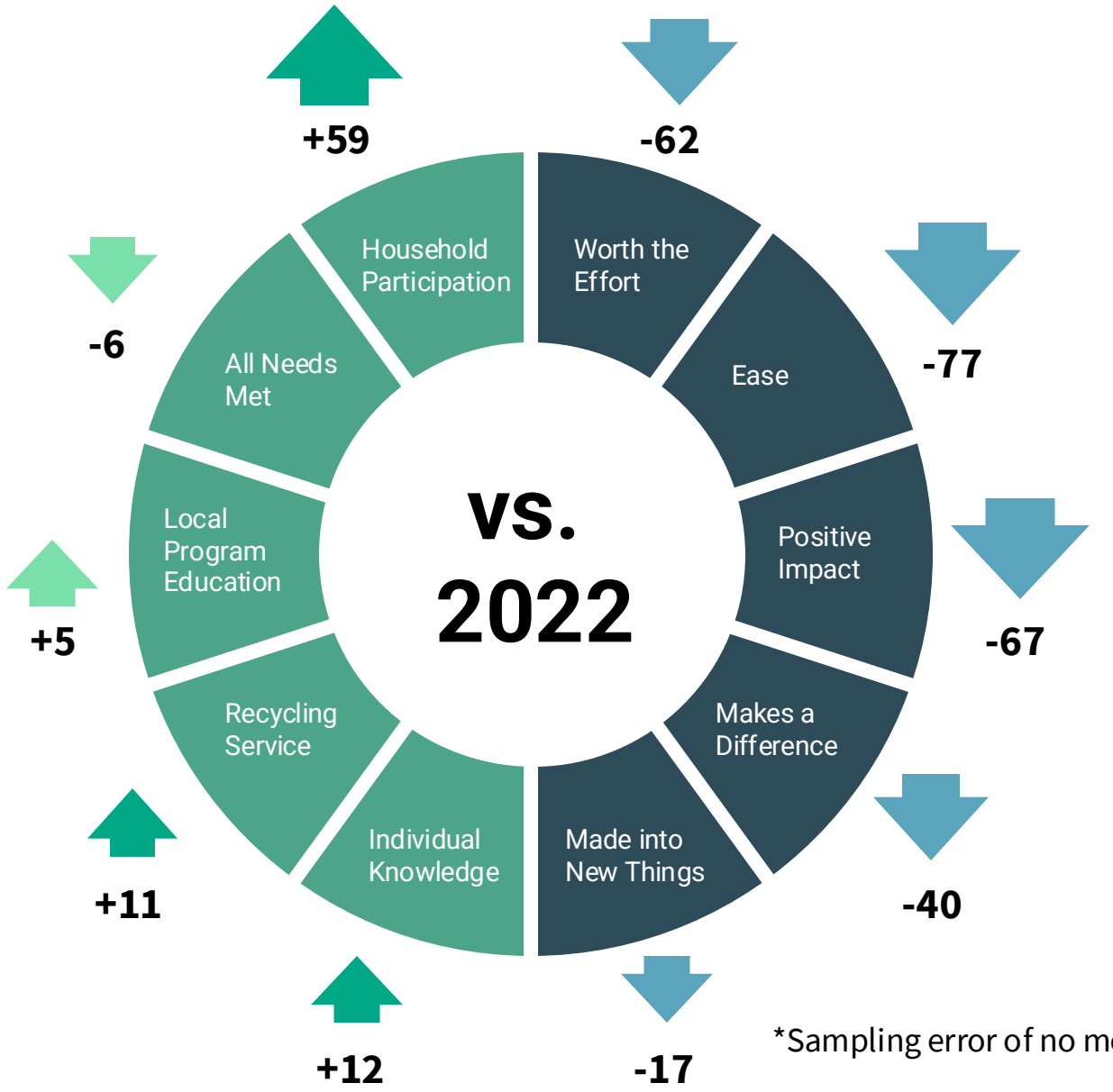
663

-53

vs. 2022

*Sampling error of no more that +/-1.3% at 95% confidence

Programmatic Factors



Perception-based Factors

*Sampling error of no more that +/-1.3% at 95% confidence

Recycling Confidence Index Scores for Oversampled States



609 Overall

554 Programmatic
663 Perceptive



California

637

593
681



Washington

626

574
678



Minnesota

646

595
697



New York

641

592
691



Colorado

573

490
657



Nebraska

571

495
647



Tennessee

528

438
617



Maryland

631

588
674

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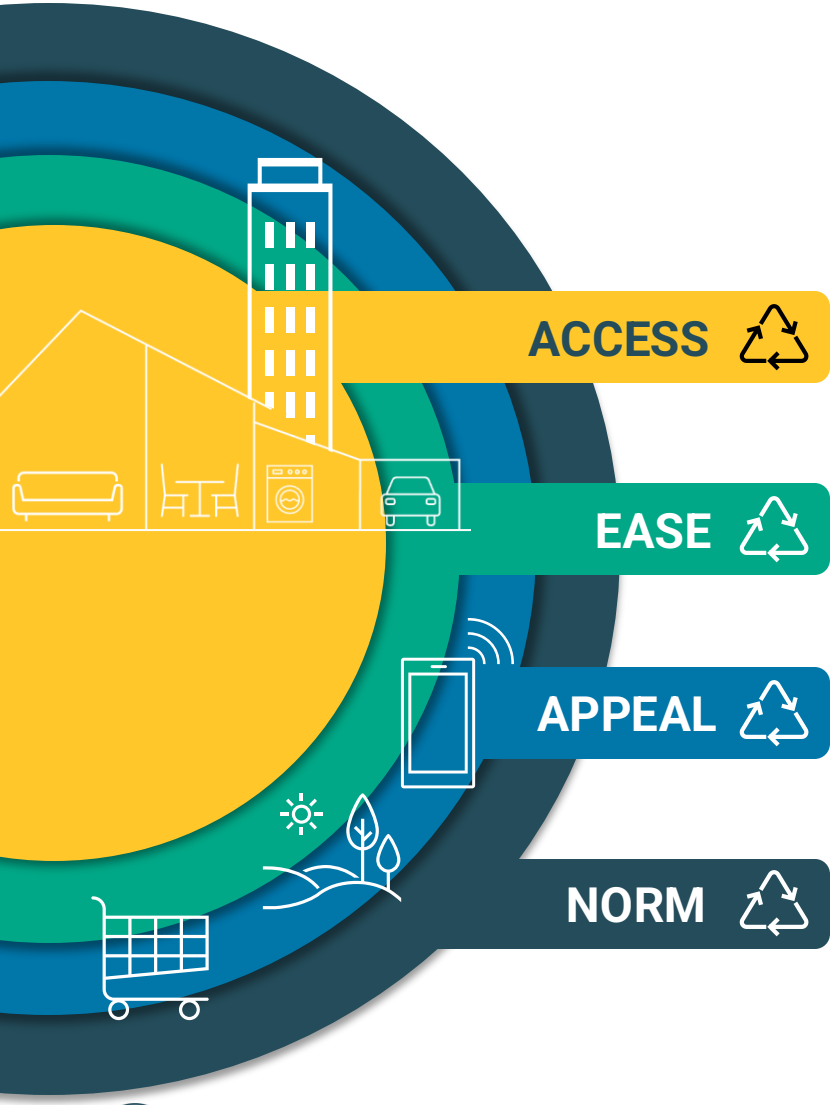
A Recipe for Change

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Why Are Only 24% of Recyclables Captured in Households?

- People support recycling, but they are confused and frustrated.
- Less than half believe their recyclables are made into new things.
- We’re not adequately capturing public attention--75% of people don’t recall receiving communication about their recycling program.
- Recycling systems must integrate seamlessly into household practices.



Accurate, Frequent, and Sustained Public Participation in Residential Recycling is achievable if we deploy intervention packages that:

Provide **all people** across all geographies and housing type access to recycling convenient services.

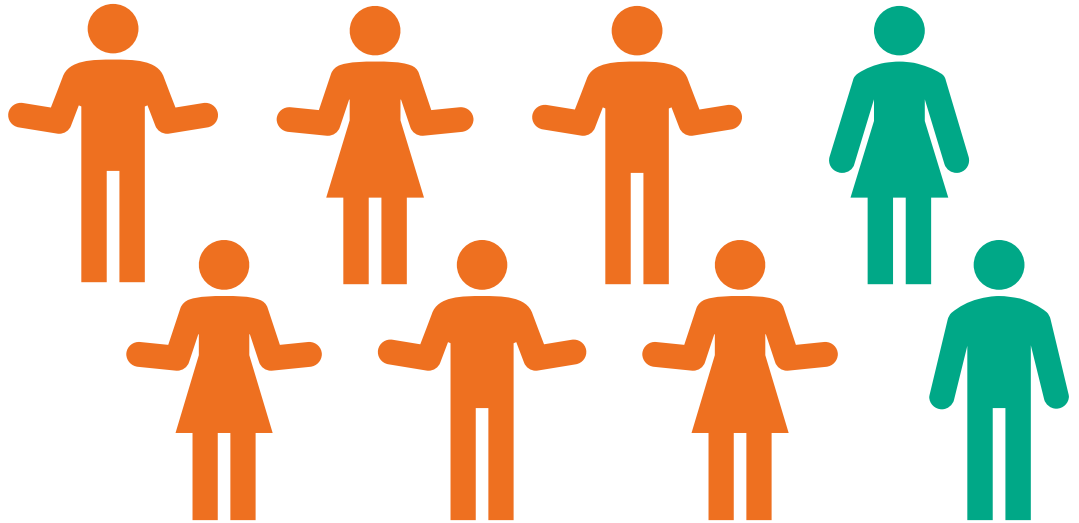
Make it as easy to recycle recyclable materials as it is to throw them away by delivering clear and timely **step-by-step instructions** at key points of decision and **physical tools** that effectively integrate with household preferences.

Provide a **compelling and consistent hook that grabs attention**, provides personalized reasons to recycle, builds trust, creates meaning and motivates action.

Make participation observable and authentically demonstrate that **individuals are not alone** in caring or doing more than local service providers, brands, leaders, neighbors, etc.

75%

of people **cannot recall** receiving a communication about their local recycling program.



CA	CO	MD	MN	NE	NY	TN	WA
74%	81%	74%	72%	80%	74%	89%	71%

Variations by Oversampled State

Key Insight

Supportive intervention builds confidence, participation, and capture.

Those who can recall recycling communications

+19%

vs. National Avg



Those who have an in-home recycling bin

+19%

vs. National Avg

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The Detailed Recipe for Community Engagement

Our Evidence-backed Recipe for Change

Detailed Recipe for Community Engagement

ACCESS	EASE	EASE	APPEAL	NORM
Access & Program Design	Tools to Reduce Physical Workload	Tools to Reduce Mental Workload	Cohesive Messaging that Appeals	Community Saturation & Signaling

> We should probably collect it and take it (to drop-off), but **we just have been bad. It's my own guilt.** I guess it's the right thing to do. I know we shouldn't be throwing everything into the landfill. There's got to be an end to that, ...

Source: Ethnographic research conducted by **Point Forward** and **The Recycling Partnership**.



WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

All people have access to service that makes it is as easy to recycle recyclable materials as it is to throw them away.

Proof Points

- 33M HHs (SF & MF) still do not have any access
- 63% of Multi-dwelling HHs do not have access.
- Participation requirements and accepted materials differ

Common Barriers

- Housing Type
- Program design does not incentivize desired behaviors
- Cost of curbside recycling cart
- Cost of maintaining consistent services over time

Solutions & Tactics

- Regional Standards for Accepted Materials Lists
- Add curbside, multifamily, drop-off programs
- Expansion of accepted materials through improved supply chains
- Optimize Frequency of Collection
- Rewards, Penalties (Rejection), Savings

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Increasing participation in multifamily recycling with a decrease in contamination.

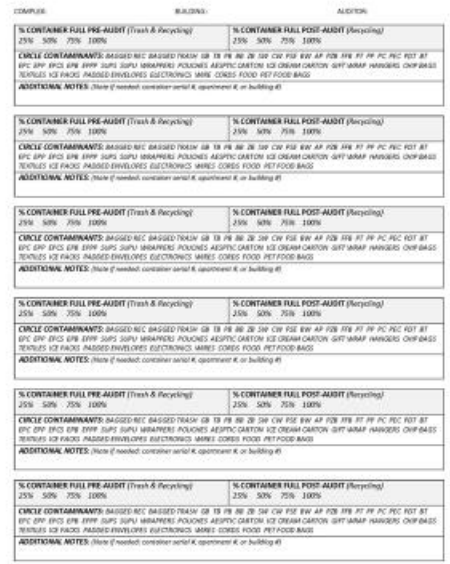
Proof Points

- Contamination in containers is usually over 15%.
- Unlike single-family, multifamily residents don't have containers located outside their back door.
- Residents not aware there is onsite recycling.

Common Barriers

- Recycle containers are located in far corners making it difficult for residents to utilize.
- What are the common contaminants to target education.
- Residents not educated on what can be recycled.

Solutions & Tactics



% CONTAINER FULL PRE-AUDIT (Trash & Recycling) 25% 50% 75% 100%	% CONTAINER FULL POST-AUDIT (Recycling) 25% 50% 75% 100%
CIRCLE CONTAMINANTS: BAGGED REC BAGGED TRASH GB TB PB BB ZB SW CW FSE BW AP FZB RPB PT PP PC PEC FOT BT EPC EPP EPCS EPB EPPP SUPS SUPU WRAPPERS POUCHES ASEPTIC CARTON ICE CREAM CARTON GIFT WRAP HANGERS CHIP BAGS TEXTILES ICE PACKS PADDED ENVELOPES ELECTRONICS WIRES CORDS FOOD PET FOOD BAGS	
ADDITIONAL NOTES: (Note if needed: container serial #, apartment #, or building #)	



Our Evidence-backed Recipe for Change

Detailed Recipe for Community Engagement



Access & Program Design

Tools to Reduce Physical Workload

Tools to Reduce Mental Workload

Cohesive Messaging that Appeals

Community Saturation & Signaling

> We consume so many things, and our trash gets filled so fast, it's kind of hard to designate one for recycling.

Source: Ethnographic research conducted by **Point Forward** and **The Recycling Partnership**.



EASE

Tools to Reduce **Physical** Workload

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

All people have the right in-home and curbside systems to meet their needs, it's not too much of a burden to participate.

Proof Points

People experience the activity of recycling as a **physical burden**.

HH with recycling systems that **integrate seamlessly** into household practices are more successful.

Common Barriers

- Most lack in-home bins, especially in laundry room, garage, bathroom, etc.
- Different tools needed for different packages (e.g., cardboard)
- 'I don't want to clean my trash'

Solutions & Tactics

- In-Home Bins
- Guides for setting up in-home systems that extend beyond the kitchen
- Optimized Location of Collection Containers
- Wheeled Carts
- Valet Service



Challenges

- Slow/Inefficient
- Unsafe for Drivers
  - Traffic Safety
  - Common back & shoulder injuries
  - Knee and Ankle Sprains
  - Bin Hazards
  - Weather
- High Driver Turnover
- Bad Messaging
- Low Customer Convenience & Participation
- High Cost to Operate

LOW CONTAMINATION

EASE

Tools to Reduce **Physical** Workload

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Program design that is convenient for residents/businesses and has less hazards for collections staff

Proof Points

Rate Study to address cost
And help from Birdie



WHY CARTS?

Carts are coming to all households in our community because they're the most effective and efficient way to improve our recycling and trash service.

Makes Recycling Easier for You
No more separating your cans, bottles, and jars from your paper and cardboard.

Protects the Environment
Keeping recyclables out of the landfill and being able to get old stuff turned into new stuff.

Keeps Workers Safe

More Space
Replacing your two 18-gallon bins with a 64-gallon cart and 18-gallon glass bin means you can recycle over 120% more materials.

Recycling is important to our community, and carts are the next step to make it even better.

We're excited to get our recycling program rolling—and hope you are too!

Common Barriers

Contamination

Glass Collections
C
Cart Size – 32, 65 and 95 gal options

Delivery of 28,000+ carts

Solutions & Tactics



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WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Valet Service

Proof Points

- Apartment management will contract for valet trash service.
- On the occasion they contract for recycle, the contractor is not using the onsite containers.

Common Barriers

- If there is valet trash, residents are not likely to walk recycle to a far dumpster enclosure.
- Not having a container for recycle material.

Solutions & Tactics

Provide a simplified valet program with interns to see if participation increases.

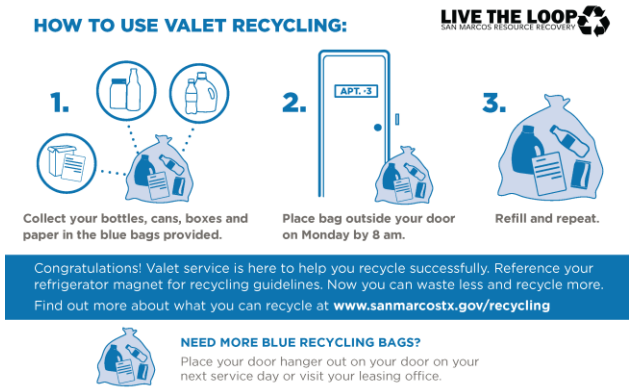


WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Individual Education

Proof Points

Detailed instructions on how to set bags for valet service.



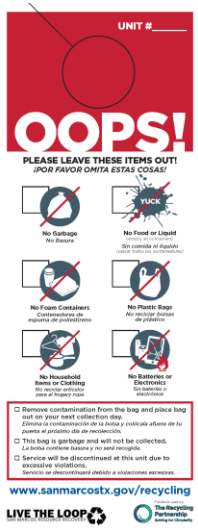
Common Barriers

Confusion on what can be recycled.



Solutions & Tactics

- Contract for valet service
- Use app to track how many bags are collected at each complex and contamination at each unit.





Our Evidence-backed Recipe for Change

Detailed Recipe for Community Engagement



Access & Program Design

Tools to Reduce Physical Workload

Tools to Reduce Mental Workload

Cohesive Messaging that Appeals

Community Saturation & Signaling

Amber



> I have all these questions that I feel like no one knows and **I don't think there's easy answers** because I feel like if I've Googled it, you get like five different answers because it depends upon the actual recycling company as to if they accept it or not.

Source: Ethnographic research conducted by **Point Forward** and **The Recycling Partnership**.

Tools to Reduce **Mental** Workload

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

All people know how to get accurate answers to their questions and regularly use those tools. People recycle without thinking about it.

Proof Points

People are **confused and frustrated.**

There is an immense sense of **cognitive burden,** and people don't want to think about recycling.

Common Barriers

- Rules and lists differ across geographies, and change.
- Confusion around new formats/multi-material
- Conflicting messaging in packaging claims and localized instructions
- Desire for connection to other materials (e.g., textiles)

Solutions & Tactics

- Infocard, Magnets
- Signage
- Customer Service
- Room-specific Guides
- Text Notifications
- Reminders
- Chatbot & QR Code

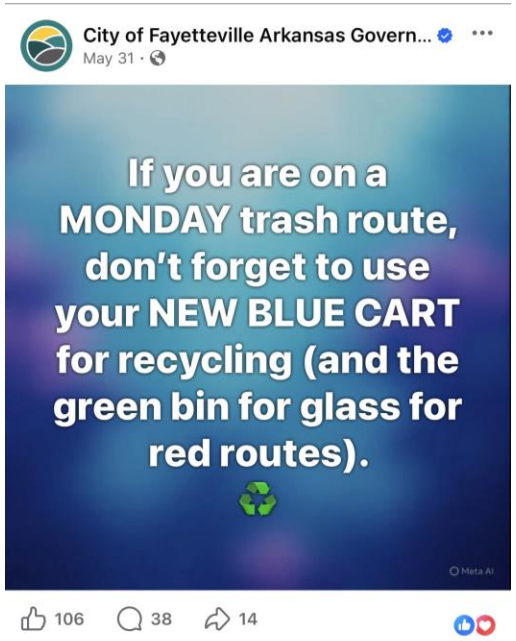
EASE

Tools to Reduce **Mental** Workload

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Clear transition communications resulting in an increase in collections with low contamination (less than 10%)

Proof Points



Common Barriers

Challenging to reach all 28,000+ households and businesses

Glass Collections – every other week collections

Communications Barriers – language, this is NOT a new trash cart

Solutions & Tactics



The Recycling Partnership

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Detailed Recipe for Community Engagement



ACCESS	EASE	APPEAL	NORM
Access & Program Design	Tools to Reduce Physical Workload	Tools to Reduce Mental Workload	Cohesive Messaging that Appeals	Community Saturation & Signaling

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> There is **no rallying cry**—
> there isn't a sense of urgency.

Source: Ethnographic research conducted by **Point Forward** and **The Recycling Partnership**.



APPEAL

Cohesive Messaging that Appeals

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

All people are invited in with the right 'hook', feel connected to their local system, and believe it is worthwhile to participate.

Proof Points

We're not adequately capturing public attention, delivering messages that motivate action, or creating transparency in the process that builds confidence in the system.

Common Barriers

- Competition for the public's attention.
- Most people initially think they do not need help recycling.
- Yet, 75% say they have not received any or enough information.

Solutions & Tactics

- A relatable spokesperson, trusted advisor, mascot
- Colorful creative that stands out
- Calls to Action
- Empathetic Messaging
- Co-creation

Results from 2020

Education only: 4.9% increase
Bin and Education: 27.3% increase
Valet, Bin, and Education: 58.5% increase





Results from 2024

Increase in 20-40 tons a month.

APPEAL

Cohesive Messaging that Appeals

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Clear, concise, accessible, consistent and frequent messaging.

Proof Points

Regularly reinforce messaging

Minimizing contamination and maximizing transparency are very important to the community

Build and keep public trust

Celebrate success but also be honest if we make a mistake

Common Barriers

Cardboard Recycling

Glass Collections – every other week collections

Communications Barriers – language, this is NOT a new trash cart

Contamination management is a huge challenge

Solutions & Tactics





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Results

- Participation increased from 41% to 55%*
- 20% Increase in recyclables collected
- % Contamination





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Our Evidence-backed Recipe for Change

Detailed Recipe for Community Engagement



Access & Program Design	Tools to Reduce Physical Workload	Tools to Reduce Mental Workload	Cohesive Messaging that Appeals	Community Saturation & Signaling

> One of my co-workers at the airport, **she gets on everybody (about recycling)**...We'll line up the bottles and stuff on the counter for her...We don't have to do that, but we've just all gotten in the habit of doing it. Because we know that Mary wants to...it's just an extra little step that we do.



Source: Ethnographic research conducted by **Point Forward** and **The Recycling Partnership**.

NORM

Community Saturation & Signaling

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

All people can observe desired behaviors throughout their community and see regular signals that others care.

Proof Points

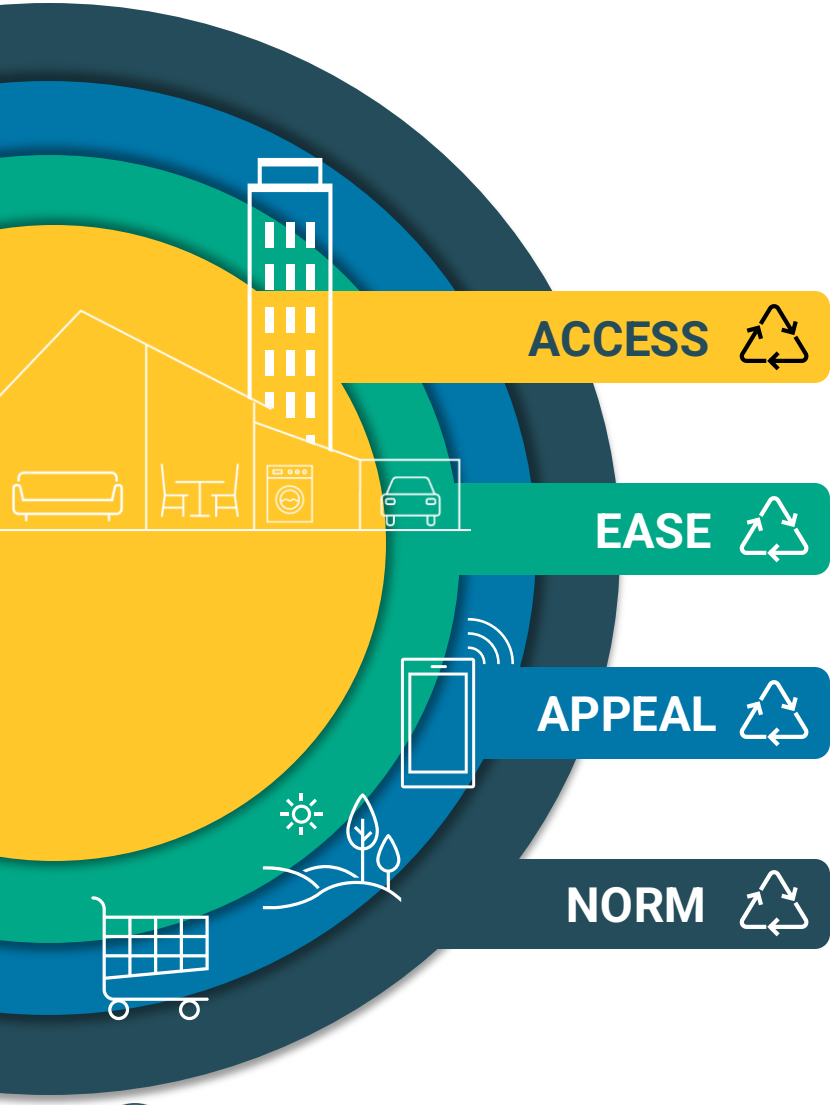
People are **looking for signals** that recycling is common practice and that others – from their housemates and neighbors to local government and brands -- appreciate the work they are putting in.

Common Barriers

- " I don't believe my neighbors are participating."
- "I don't think my service provider cares or is actually recycling."
- "Does anyone care if I participate?"

Solutions & Tactics

- Connected, wrap-around campaigns
- Neighbor-to-neighbor postcards
- Stickers and bin decals
- In-person outreach
- Yard Signs
- Comparative Stats
- Personalized Feedback



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- Make participation observable and authentically demonstrate that **individuals are not alone** in caring or doing more than local service providers, brands, leaders, neighbors, etc.

Resources

Consulting Opportunities

Email klevau@recyclingpartnership.org or lkeenan@recyclingpartnership.org

Grant Opportunities

Recycling Program Solutions Hub

Questions?

