

Good Safety Sense for Refuse & Recycle Workers

Refuse and recycle workers keep our homes, streets, and alleyways clear of the debris created from everyday living. They pick up the garbage for disposal, green waste for composting, and “blue stream” waste for recycle and reuse. While the industry has more automated equipment in use than ever before, the hazards such as ergonomic injuries, hazardous wastes, and vehicle accidents remain.

Vehicle safety is the single most important part of your job. Driver safety and defensive driving training will help to protect you out on the road. Refuse and recycle workers are listed in the top ten most hazardous occupations because they are often struck by vehicles impatient to pass a slow moving waste truck or because they fall underneath their own trucks. The safest way to ride in a waste truck is to be seat belted into the cab.

If you must ride on a waste truck, stand only on the dedicated riding platforms and grasp the hand-holds firmly. Do not lean out from the vehicle. Stay on the truck until it comes to a complete halt. Do not ride the vehicle if it is backing, exceeds ten miles per hour, or travels more than 1000 feet. Never ride on a truck loading sill or in its hoppers. Ideally, waste trucks with a foot crew should have backup

beepers, plenty of mirrors, and technology such as cameras, sensors, or two-way radios to promote communication and visibility between the driver and the workers on foot.

To stay safe on the job, wear the personal protective equipment (PPE) necessary for your job site and tasks. Highly visible clothing makes you more noticeable to coworkers and other drivers so you are less likely to be struck by a vehicle. Safety footwear with wide cleats and a slip-resistant sole prevents you from falling off of riding platforms and slipping underneath a moving vehicle. Sturdy work gloves protect your hands from the materials you handle.

Get the training you need to operate waste and recycle vehicles and equipment, which often use hydraulic mechanisms to crush and compress materials. Watch for catch and crush points, use lock-out and tag-out procedures, and never work on energized equipment that could start suddenly.

Take chemical safety training to understand the hazards of the materials you may find in your pickups. Wastes such as explosives, chemicals, aerosol cans, and compressed gas tanks can be hazardous when they are disturbed, mixed, punctured, or compressed. If you suspect

a waste is hazardous, do not pick it up or disturb it. Follow your company policy on the proper response and call-out for hazardous materials situations.

Sharps waste includes hypodermic needles, broken glass, and metal shards. Report medical waste that has improperly entered the waste stream and ensure that it gets correct pickup and handling. Encourage your service users to double bag or containerize broken glass and sharp metal pieces to reduce your exposure to them. Never tamp garbage down with your feet or your hands to avoid cuts, scrapes, and puncture wounds.

Protect your back and muscles at work. Lift with your legs and NOT your back. Maintain neutral postures by keeping your back straight, your head forward, and your arms and legs close to your body. Avoid awkward postures and know your lifting limits. Take a short rest break every 20-30 minutes and rotate tasks throughout the day to avoid repetition and overuse injuries.

Practice good safety sense when you are picking up refuse and recycle materials. Anything else would be a waste.

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