FOOD WASTE DROP-OFF PROGRAM
Best Practices for Central Ohio Communities

INTRODUCTION

Since 2017, interest in food waste diversion in Franklin County has increased. As this interest has grown, the options available to residents has also expanded. Backyard composting has always been an option for residents that have sufficient yard space and the motivation to manage a backyard compost bin. A number of vendors are now providing residential curbside collection of food waste for residents who are willing to pay for the service. These options, however, are not practical for all residents.

As a result, several Franklin County communities have established free public Food Waste Drop-offs to allow their residents to collect food scraps at home and deliver the material to the drop-off location at their convenience. To help communities establish a program that works for them, SWACO assists its partners to plan, implement and monitor a residential food waste drop-off program, as well as providing funding for the first year of the program or a program expansion. This document is a record of best practices we've identified along the way.

PLANNING YOUR PROGRAM

☐ Choosing a name for your program

We recommend calling drop-off sites a "Food Waste Drop-off" and referring to the program as the "Food Waste Drop-off Program" or "Food Waste Collection Program" for the reasons below.

✚ Calling the site a compost drop-off may confuse residents. The bins themselves are places to drop-off food waste (or food scraps), not a place to drop-off all organic materials (like yard waste) or a place to get compost.

✚ In the event that your community creates a community-scale composting program (for example, one in which organics are composted and compost is given away to residents) you may want to call that a "Compost Program".

✚ The term "Food Scrap Drop-Off" is equally well suited to describe these collection sites however in Franklin County, the term "Food Waste Drop-Off" was chosen by early programs and thus promoted for consistency. Using the same terminology keeps messaging consistent across communities so that these drop-off sites are immediately recognizable for residents who've moved from another community..

The term "Composting Program" is not recommended as this collection program functions to collect food waste [or food scraps] for later processing and does not deal with creating compost directly.

☐ Capacity Planning

Capacity is key! The number of containers needed for the volume of residential material collected at a given site will depend on a variety of factors. There is no easy rule of thumb to project capacity needs, but one should always plan for more capacity than needed. Nothing will kill a drop-off program faster than overflowing bins resulting in rodents & odor issues. Things to consider include:

✚ Budget for offering this program

✚ Number of sites you want to collect from

✚ How widely you will promote the program

✚ Weekly vs. biweekly pick up (weekly recommended)

☐ Strategies for Start-up and Management of your Drop-off Site

When designing your program, select the right system and promotional activities to grow at a manageable rate.

Consider the following:

✚ Require Registration: Requiring registration has a number of benefits. By limiting services to registered members, you have greater control over the growth of your program and help ensure that drop-off sites are not overwhelmed. Through the registration processes, you also create an email list that enables ongoing communication with program participants as the program evolves. You'll be able to send an email about contamination issues, service updates and educational information including resources for food waste prevention. If you plan on expanding your program, you can notify those who have signed up for program updates with expansion information. While you may not be able to enforce use of the program only by registrants (unless bins with key codes are used), you can still **instruct residents to register** to maximize the number of site users who do. Use language that instructs, rather than "suggests" or "asks" participants to register. See example registration questions.

✚ Provide Signage with Clear Instructions at the Drop-off Site: Signage at the drop-off site serves as one point of instruction for the use of the site. SWACO's signage has been created with our partners and best practices and that it is available for download and print for anyone that is not a grant recipient. Additional instruction can be provided by email to residents who register for the program or along with equipment if any is being provided to residents.

✚ Outreach and Education can be done through a community webpage, social media, resident workshops, and/or email and newsletters. A QR code on signage at the drop-off site can serve as an ongoing way to communicate about the program. More on this is included later in this document.

✚ Provide Equipment: By providing buckets and/or compostable liners you can make collection and delivery easier for residents. Providing buckets also creates a great opportunity to include educational materials to residents about what is accepted in the composting program, and what materials should not be placed in their containers. Providing a bucket also can give you a baseline for the number of participants at least initially.

✚ One Time Give-Aways: Some communities have given away buckets to early adopters as a promotional element to kick-off the program. If no formal registration is required to use the drop-off program, this provides an opportunity to ask for voluntary email addresses to provide ongoing education to users.

✚ Engage Decision Makers: Providing buckets to council members to "beta test" the program can be a great way to engage influential individuals and build support for the program.

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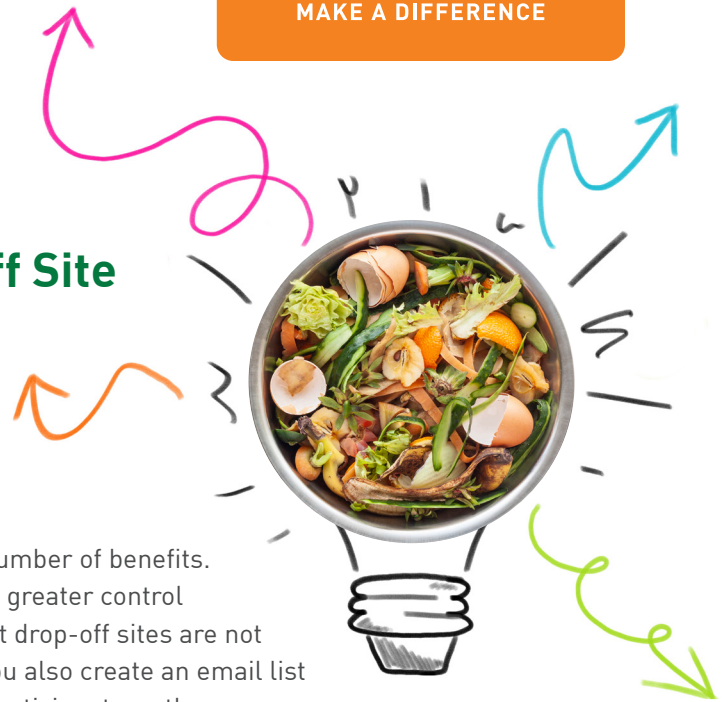
+ **Print Promotion Only:** Some communities simply promote their program without giveaways or other sign-up methods, allowing residents to use their own containers.

+ **Business Sponsorships:** There may be sponsorship opportunities for local business to help support the program.

• Are there local restaurants in your area that generate "pickle buckets" from food items they purchase? Would they be willing to donate them to your community to give away to residents?

• Are there local hardware stores or other businesses that could co-brand the buckets? These partners may be interested in providing compost containers in exchange for the opportunity to brand containers with their logos.

☐ Promotion

Communities have generally found that promotion of the program is easy and inexpensive.

+ SWACO provides financial and technical support to communities in its jurisdiction to promote new drop-off programs in conjunction with promotion of the Save More Than Food Community Campaign. The toolkit for this campaign is available for any community to use. Additional communication materials are also available for free download at https://savemorethanfood.org/share-the-campaign/

+ Once initial promotion has resulted in adequate usage of the location, ongoing promotion can generally be light, using the same techniques as the initial promotion.

+ Adjust promotional efforts to reflect the site's level of usage. **Avoid promoting the program further unless there is adequate capacity to accept growing amounts of material at your site.**

+ For new locations, some communities have started initial education efforts by narrowly focusing on food scraps, as opposed to items such as soiled pizza boxes and uncoated paper products, until frequency of collection and needed cart capacity at the location is established. Once usage of the location has settled, the community can broaden accepted items to include additional compostable products. Most communities have maintained a food scrap focus in order to prioritize the recovery of high nutrient materials especially since compostable packaging and soiled cardboard are bulky items that can quickly eat up the capacity of a given site.
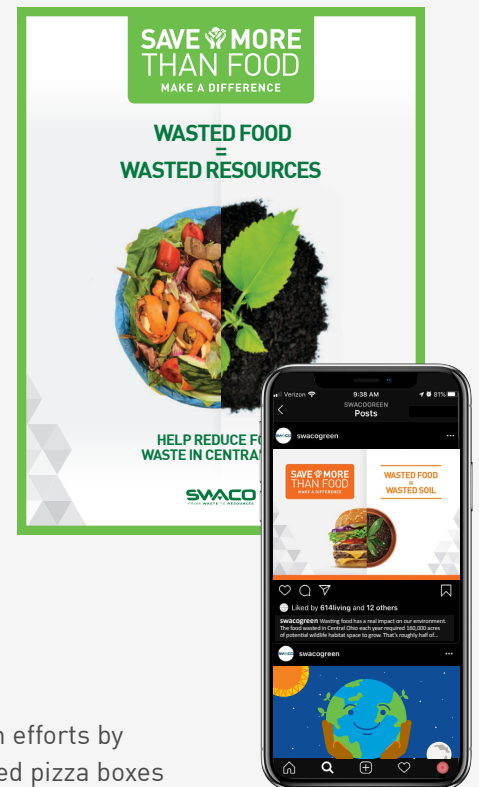
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A typical food waste drop-off consists of a location with six (6) to eight (8) 64-gallon wheeled, lidded containers where residents can drop-off food waste generated in their home. Those containers are serviced on a regular schedule (weekly or every other week) by a service provider and the food waste is transported to a registered compost facility for composting. There are several factors that should be considered when thinking about the infrastructure necessary for a successful program.

☐ Location

An ideal location for a food waste drop-off is convenient to residents but not too exposed to public traffic to cause problems . Our grant recipients have found that it is best to have these available 24 hours per day and not to limit the time or place the location behind a gate that has limited access. An ideal location might be:

➕ Adjacent to a public facility, so that it is easy to monitor; or

➕ Adjacent to a facility that residents regularly visit like a recreation center, church, or park so that visiting is convenient. If the site is in a high visibility area with a lot of traffic from passer-bys, placing a trash can nearby can help cut down contamination.

➕ Easy for residents using different modes of transportation to access (walking, bike, vehicular) without disrupting existing uses of the area.

➕ Easy to find if you know where to look, but somewhat out of the way from unrelated public traffic (not too noticeable if you're not looking for it).

☐ Frequency of Pick Up

Drop-offs are picked up either weekly or every other week. All communities thus far have chosen weekly pick-ups as a way to increase capacity without increasing the size of drop-off sites. More frequent pick-ups also help cut down on odors and make insect issues exceedingly rare.

Your service provider should work with you to initially set up and adjust service needs.

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☐ Enclosures

While not a necessity, a simple enclosure around a drop-off location is beneficial for screening purposes. The advantages of an enclosure are:

➕ By creating a defined collection area, an enclosure provides a clean and organized look to the site that may encourage more careful use of the containers and attention to avoiding contamination especially if other streams are collected in the same area

➕ Aesthetics – it provides for some visual screening of the location

➕ It allows for the easy placement of signage.

The cost to construct an enclosure will vary depending on its size and complexity, but a simple enclosure has be constructed for $500 to $750 in materials. See examples from Central Ohio Communities here.

☐ Signage

Educational signage at the drop-off location should be used to educate residents on the proper use of the site. Food waste haulers typically provide instructions for what types of food scraps they accept. Ask them what materials they have to offer residents.

SWACO's signage has been created with input from our partners and is required to be used by grant recipients at their drop-off sites. SWACO encourages all Franklin County communities to use this signage to maintain consistent messaging and recognition of community food waste collection programs across the region. This signage is available for others outside of Franklin County as well. See editable signage files here.

Using QR Codes

As shown in signage pictured above, a QR code can provide a flexible way of sharing information about the site and program with residents.

Communities to date have primarily focused their signage on food scraps and soiled napkins and have excluded bulkier or potentially confusing compostable items (pizza boxes, uncoated paper products, compostable cutlery and containers) because:

+ food waste collection services are currently expensive. With limited capacity for collection, communities prioritize capturing high nutrient food scraps;

+ containers take up a lot of volume and could overwhelm limited cart space

+ the average resident may find it difficult to tell between a compostable and plastic cutlery or container

If you are developing your own signage:

+ Use simple language and focus on what should **not** be placed in the container.

+ Use realistic images and limit words so that signage is quickly understandable.

+ If accepting compostable packaging and cutlery, specify that **ONLY BPI Certified** compostables are accepted and consider that additional education may be required on this topic.

+ Some communities have promoted their vendor's web site to their residents as the "go to" source of information about what can and cannot be composted through their program.

+ Use a QR code to link to other information like

- how to use the site
- how to report an issue or a full bin
- sign up for an email list about food waste reduction/composting/green initiatives
- who to direct questions to/ allow for feedback on the program

MAINTAINING YOUR PROGRAM

☐ Measurement

Tracking the following information will help you manage, grow, and improve your program:

✚ **Number of participants.** If registration isn't required, you can estimate this number based on the tonnage collected, using a conversion factor provided by your service provider.

✚ **Tons of material collected per month and per year;** seasonal fluctuation can be informative

✚ **Do you know what residents think of the program?** Gather feedback from program participants via an email survey 1 year after launching the food waste collection program and periodically to understand challenges and needs.

☐ Monitoring/Site Management

The first round of residents who utilize food waste drop-off programs are highly motivated – they have voluntarily decided to collect food waste from home and transport it to the drop-off location. As a result, they generally take the time to understand the rules and follow them. Across grant communities in Central Ohio:

✚ Contamination has been very low, likely, because early adopters are going out of their way to use the site and are already somewhat knowledgeable or interested in food waste diversion. Nevertheless, monitoring your site is important to catch contamination and take immediate action to remedy the cause of it.

✚ The most prevalent contaminant may be plastic non-compostable bags. Keep an eye out for these in your containers. Additional signage may be necessary to provide constant reminders to participants.

✚ Spraying compost bins and the contents with household vinegar can help to reduce any odor and insect issues. This may be particularly important in summer months. Ask if your hauler sprays down bins or provides a new bin with every service.

☐ Ongoing Communication

Even for motivated participants there is likely to be some confusion about what can and cannot be composted. Continued communication on what should and should not be discarded as part of the program the program and sharing progress reports on food waste diversion will help keep participants engaged and contamination rates low.

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☐ Service Contracts

There are currently a limited number of service provides that provide the food waste collection services in Central Ohio. The service that they provide will be a critical component to the success of your program.

✚ Use their knowledge and experience to improve your program. They should be able to help you identify capacity needs, frequency of collection, and will likely have existing education materials that you can utilize.

✚ Develop a strong relationship with your service provider. During the first year of operation, quarterly meetings to discuss the program are recommended. Regular, ongoing communication is important.

✚ Request that your service provider provide you with regular reports documenting the material that they collect from your drop-off site. These reports should include at least the following information: a report of every pick-up they make; the weight of material collected from your location; a rating or report of contamination on every pick-up; and pictures of any contamination that is identified.

To avoid your drop off being inundated in the Fall, over-communicate whether pumpkins are allowed at the drop off site well in advance of Halloween. In 2021, the City of Upper Arlington collected 32 tons of pumpkins over 6 weeks starting early November. Two 20-yard roll-off containers were co-located next to the drop-off site and hauled to a local composting operation as they filled up. A local waste hauler was contracted to haul the material.

Additional Questions?

If you have additional questions about establishing or operating a community food waste drop-off site, please contact **foodwasteinfo@swaco.org**. We would be happy to provide additional information and connect you with communities that are currently offering this service to their residents.

Links found in this document:

✚ Save More Than Food Community Campaign Toolkit

✚ Save More Than Food Campaign Communication Resources

✚ Visual Tour of Drop-off Sites in Central Ohio Communities

✚ Example Registration Questions

✚ Site Signage