

CASE STUDY

Partnering with Community Based Organizations to Accelerate Compost and Recycling Adoption



Executive Summary

The Pacific Coast Food Waste Commitment (PCFWC) and the City of Oakland partnered with two community-based organizations (CBOs) in Oakland Chinatown to explore whether more businesses would comply with the local and state composting laws after receiving CBO outreach.

Goal

To explore if CBO outreach would lead to more businesses signing up for recycle and compost service, particularly in a community where English is not the dominant language.

Results

The businesses who received CBO-led outreach had higher rates of service compliance compared to all of Oakland Chinatown, though the simultaneous issuing of Notices of Violations/citations affected the conclusiveness of this observation (see full study for details). Additionally, other learnings on collaborating with CBOs in this manner were observed and summarized for policymakers.

Key Findings

CBO outreach proved to be a key factor in raising awareness about service sign up. The community’s trust in them and their targeted support with custom materials worked effectively, which can be seen in both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Project leaders also received feedback about the outreach and potential barriers to compliance with these services.

Business-Cited Barriers



- Space to put compost and recycling bins is limited.
- Crime and safety concerns dominate businesses’ priorities.
- Businesses lack awareness about service waivers that Oakland offers.

Business-Cited Preferences for Support

- Materials should be published in multiple languages.
- Government-issued notifications are effective.
- CBOs should publish mini-grant information as a resource on their websites.

Recommendations for Policymakers

- Leverage CBOs throughout the policymaking process, from development to implementation.
- Foster long-term relationships with CBOs that go beyond projects.
- Prepare to adapt for changing local conditions (e.g., safety concerns).
- Consider publishing information in multiple languages to include the whole community.

Increase in businesses signed up for service who received CBO outreach	Increase Across all Chinatown businesses
Compost Service Compliance 	
25%	20.83%
Recycle Service 	
83%	12.86%

Project Goals and Background

California State law SB 1383 aims to keep food and other organic waste out of landfills. Local jurisdictions, such as the City of Oakland, are tasked with implementing and enforcing the statewide policy; a process that involves significant education and outreach to businesses and communities throughout the state. In addition, the City of Oakland and Alameda County are both members of the Pacific Coast Food Waste Commitment (PCFWC) – a public-private partnership dedicated to reducing food waste throughout the West Coast region by 50% by 2030.

In 2023, the City of Oakland conducted a pilot with the PCFWC and a local community-based organization (CBO), the Oakland Chinatown Improvement Council (OCIC), to learn if compost service compliance outcomes could be improved by CBOs assisting in outreach to businesses, particularly for primarily non-English speaking communities. A historic and diverse neighborhood and business district, Oakland Chinatown’s vibrant small business community made for an ideal pilot setting.



Though compost service was the focus of the pilot, partners also collected data on recycle service since the two often go hand in hand in government communications.



Compost Service Compliance



Recycle Service Compliance

Through this collaboration between local CBOs and government, OCIC and the City of Oakland aimed to identify and empathize with merchants’ pain points, understand their goals, and help connect them with support to reach compliance and avoid fines for not being enrolled in compost and recycle services.

OCIC engaged the locally-based Toishan Benevolent Association (TBA) to lead on-the-ground implementation of the outreach. TBA organizes local volunteers with native language capabilities (Toishanese, Cantonese, and Mandarin) to provide daily patrol outreaches to Chinatown businesses around safety and public health concerns. OCIC, the City of Oakland, and the PCFWC also

collaborated to create and customize [educational materials for businesses](#) in Chinese. Included in these materials is an accessible English and Chinese web page to be hosted on the [OCIC website](#) and made available for Oakland Chinatown businesses to locate resources related to composting, recycling, and food waste reduction.

The collaboration between partners began in January 2023. The outreach to businesses took place over three months between March and June. The timeline was originally intended to take place over four weeks, but incidents of crime and business safety concerns led to a delay and elongation of implementation. **OCIC and TBA collaboratively reached out to 17 businesses** that were pulled from a list of businesses who were not subscribed to compost or recycle service and were scheduled to receive a Notice of Violation (a warning), followed by citation and then fine if they did not comply. The outreach consisted of:

- 1 Engaging businesses in a conversation to learn of their awareness of the regulations.
- 2 Providing them with the educational materials on how to recycle, compost, and sign up for service, and a copy of the Notice of Violation but with explanatory text in Chinese.
- 3 Administering a business survey that asked businesses about their greatest challenges with subscribing to service among other questions.



Illustration: Illegal dumping piles on a Chinatown street corner.
Bing Image Creator & Shu-Yi, L. (2023, July 2).

Outcomes and Observations

An analysis was conducted of the number of businesses who signed up for compost and recycle service after the TBA outreach. The conclusion was that businesses who received TBA outreach signed up for recycle and compost service at higher rates than the rate of sign up across all of Chinatown.

However, while this case study includes and shares project data and numbers, the pilot managers acknowledge that it is not a representative example and do not make any conclusive claims given that a) the numbers are very small for a study and b) Notices of Violations and citations/fines were issued by the City of Oakland to some businesses before and during the study. Therefore, the pilot managers refrain from attributing the increase in compost and recycle sign ups to TBA’s outreach alone.

Project managers cannot fully conclude why recycle service compliance was higher than compost by businesses who received TBA outreach, and the gap merits more investigation into business perceptions and barriers.

Compost and Recycle Compliance Results

Compost Compliance	Percent Increase	Increase in Number of Compliant Businesses
Businesses across all Chinatown	20.83%	15
Businesses that received TBA outreach	25%	2
Recycle Compliance		
Businesses across all Chinatown	12.86%	9
Businesses that received TBA outreach	83%	5

Compost Compliance

At the start of the project, eight out of the 17 businesses to receive TBA outreach in Chinatown were subscribed to compost service. By the end of this project, two additional Chinatown businesses that received TBA outreach signed up for compost service. Overall, across all of Oakland Chinatown, during the same time period, composting compliance increased by 20.83%. One out of the two newly compliant TBA outreach businesses had also received a Notice of Violation (NOV) for lack of compost service during the outreach period. Across Chinatown during the same time period, two additional businesses who did not receive TBA outreach did receive NOVs, and one signed up for service.

Recycle Compliance

At the start of the project, six out of the 17 businesses in Chinatown to receive TBA outreach were subscribed to recycle service. By the end of the project, five additional Chinatown businesses that received TBA outreach subscribed to recycle service. Overall, across all of Oakland Chinatown during the same time period, recycle compliance increased by 12.86%. Four out of the five newly compliant TBA outreach businesses had also received a Notice of Violation for lack of composting services. Across Chinatown during the same time period, two additional businesses who did not receive TBA outreach did receive NOVs for being out of compliance with composting. Both signed up for recycle service. Though the NOV was about compost service, it could have been enough to remind businesses to sign up for recycle service as well.



Illustration: Restaurant owners sort recycling and compost behind the counter with limited space.
Bing Image Creator & Shu-Yi, L. (2023, July 2).

Reflection on Partnering with Community-Based Organizations

The goal of this pilot was to explore whether partnering with CBOs could improve compost participation outcomes. Due to the challenges of the small sample size and occurrence of Notices of Violations at the same time as outreach, the project leads (OCIC, City of Oakland, and PCFWC) cannot conclude that more businesses signed up for service due to partnering with OCIC/TBA. However, the qualitative responses that TBA and OCIC received while conducting the outreach indicated that the outreach helped, and that it is beneficial to work with CBOs due to their trusted and long-standing relationships with community members and their localized knowledge about what kinds of outreach or materials are needed.

Of particular and unique value, CBOs can provide long-term support, education, and insights; by training the TBA volunteers on the organics recycling laws and food waste reduction goals, they can now and in the future always be a resource to businesses on this topic. CBOs can also help the

government hone their message and focus on what's important to the community, as OCIC did with helping the City of Oakland create educational materials as part of this pilot. As noted earlier in the study, CBOs are even better positioned to facilitate community involvement earlier in the policy process when new programs or rules are being defined and considered by governments. For communities who have not been adequately included or who have faced challenges to participation, CBOs can be a bridge and help narrow real or perceived gaps.

An important observation about the process was that TBA found it challenging to approach businesses about this topic, out of concern that it would seem punitive and impact their existing relationships. TBA wanted to be sensitive to the fact that businesses were experiencing worsening urban safety, had faced many challenges since the COVID pandemic, and thus were facing higher-than-usual constraints on their time and resources. Because TBA felt the need to be cautious during this effort, the pilot activities took



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longer than expected – this extended timeline reflected an equitable and responsive approach that project partners recognized as necessary and supported.

TBA observed that businesses want direct resources from city and county government agencies in the form of multilingual fliers, citation notices, waiver explanations, assistance forms, and information on who to call for more assistance. Community partners like OCIC and TBA can help distribute these government-created resources, but TBA felt that when outreach was related to regulations and associated penalties, it should be clear that it comes from the government to establish legitimacy.

The project leads were surprised to find that businesses mostly claimed that they were aware of the compost and recycle laws. Project leads had predicted that a language barrier would lead to more businesses reporting lack of awareness, but this was not the case, and awareness did not seem to be the major cause of lack of compliance. However, while businesses reported that government mailers were effective at spreading awareness, it seems that it still took the additional outreach to encourage compost and recycle sign up. Aspects like the person-to-person outreach, and community-specific details in the outreach materials were helpful.

Recommendations to Policy Makers

Engaging CBOs

- Future partnerships with CBOs will lead to better results if their involvement is leveraged during policy development and if their role is one of representing the local business perspective to government. CBOs help solicit information from communities that regulators may not be able to solicit on their own due to language barriers, cultural differences, government status, staff time, or other factors. It is thus critical to have them participate on committees and working groups while policy is being developed.
- CBOs should be informed of and engaged in local and state policymaking. They should also be made aware of citywide, statewide, or regional targets like the Pacific Coast Food Waste Commitment. CBOs can become educators and spokespersons for businesses, leading to more cohesive, on-the-ground action in the long term.
- Government should foster long-term partnerships with CBOs, rather than brief interventions, in order to support ongoing outreach.



Planning Outreach

- Prepare to adapt under external factors, such as safety concerns, that might impact whether businesses are open to receiving outreach information.
- Consider that the reason for non-compliance with a law or city code in neighborhoods where English is not the dominant language may not be due to lack of awareness only.
- Though lack of awareness may not be a top issue, bilingual and culturally-relevant outreach can help ensure better understanding and encourage action. Partnering with CBOs to co-develop bilingual outreach and educational materials helps to create end products that increase broader access and understanding within a diverse target audience.

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About the Pacific Coast Food Waste Commitment

The Pacific Coast Food Waste Commitment (PCFWC) arose out of the [Pacific Coast Collaborative](https://pacificcoastcollaborative.org) in 2016 and is an innovative public-private partnership made up of West Coast jurisdictions, U.S. food industry leaders, and nonprofit resource partners that together seek to eliminate food waste in the region by 50% by 2030. Learn more about the initiative and its members at pacificcoastcollaborative.org/food-waste.

Business Signatories

(As of Winter 2024)

Retailers



Hospitality and Food Service



Manufacturers



Distributors



Growers



Resource Partners

