

SAFETY FIRST!



Safety First!

You want your event to be productive and fun. That's a far likelier outcome if your event is also safe for everyone involved. Having safety policies and procedures in place will help avoid cleanup hazards and deal efficiently with safety issues that may come up. A proactive commitment to safety lets your volunteers know that their well-being is important to you.

To ensure that your event is as safe as possible, think “A-B-C.”

Assess your risks

Be prepared

Communicate clearly

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Assessing your risks

Cleanup risks can be divided into two broad categories: general risks and materials risks. General risks include such issues as site conditions, weather, traffic and people and simply “go with the territory” of holding a cleanup event. Materials risks result from potential hazards created by the items collected at the event.

The site

Take time to evaluate your site before the event.

For “drop-off” events, such as neighborhood cleanups, determine:

- best places on the site to locate parking, collection, sorting and volunteer check-in
- any potential barriers to smooth traffic flow and collection of materials
- the necessary facilities available, such as rest rooms, water sources or shelter from heat or rain.

When the the cleanup site is a beach, river or natural area cleanup, check out:

- the “lay of the land,” including the terrain and surface conditions
- potential hazards posed by harmful plants such as animals, poison oak, wasps, spiders and snakes
- the availability of and distance to shelter, restrooms and parking for volunteers
- the potential risks from materials to be removed from the site, and any specific clothing and/or safety gear that volunteers may need.

The weather

You can’t predict the weather when planning months ahead of an event. But you should consider the most likely possibilities for the season in which your event takes place. Heat, cold, rain, wind...every weather scenario requires appropriate clothing.

Shelter and drinking water are essentials in any climate or season. Alert your volunteers to be prepared for possible weather conditions and to bring whatever needed items aren’t provided on site.

Vehicles and traffic

- Have a traffic flow plan clearly communicated to volunteers.
- Use safety cones or other visible barriers to clearly indicate to drivers where to enter, drop materials and exit.
- Control traffic direction and speed by assigning volunteer “greeters” near points of entry and exit. Have plenty of volunteers at key locations to direct traffic and answer questions.

People

Cleanup events usually attract a lot of people, who bring a variety of personalities, temperaments and expectations. Consider the following in your planning:

- the demographics of your event’s location and whether you’ll need volunteers who can speak languages other than English
- which volunteers have experience in customer service or dealing with people who are hot, cranky or inconvenienced by waiting in lines
- identifying a volunteer who is a good communicator and who works well with people. Conflict and communications issues can occur during an event. It helps if people know there is a “go-to” person should difficulties arise.

Inexperienced or untrained volunteers comprise another “human hazard.” The better you anticipate other potential problems and hazards, the better prepared you’ll be to orient your volunteers, make their experience as positive as possible and increase the likelihood that they’ll be “repeat performers” at future events.



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Hazardous materials

Hazardous waste collection events are the domain of trained professionals. Safety experts recommend that organizers specifically prohibit the collection of toxic or hazardous materials at drop-off events. All promotional materials need to list what materials will not be accepted.

However, you'll get some things you haven't asked for at your cleanup. These materials may be inappropriately combined in other bulky waste or yard debris containers. Household waste may include common materials such as:

- pesticides, paint, toxic cleaning products or chemicals used in home workshops
- scrap metal, old batteries, broken glass or "sharps" (e.g., hypodermic needles, razor blades.)

Outdoor spaces targeted for cleanups are even more likely hazard sources, making it doubly important that you "size up" the site beforehand. For additional information, refer to the section on Metro's Hazardous Waste Disposal program.



An example of an illegal dump site. Many do not contain hazardous materials.

Getting prepared

Once you've assessed the potential risks and hazards associated with your event, develop a plan to prevent mishaps and to deal with those that can't be prevented. Consider the items listed below as you plan for your event.

Staffing

Calculate the number of volunteers you'll need for your event to run efficiently and safely.

Safety gear and clothing

Keep volunteers safe by instructing them to wear or have:

- closed-toe shoes – a must at any cleanup event
- safety vests
- eye protection
- gloves (heavy weight and/or liquid proof)
- tools such as shovels, long-handled “pickers” are commonly needed for cleanup events.

If your budget won't accommodate the purchase of safety gear, perhaps community partners (e.g., SOLV, local businesses) can loan or provide them as in-kind donations. Some organizations utilize Metro's local government matching grant funds to reimburse organizers who purchase safety equipment, which can then be stored for future events. Otherwise, make certain that your volunteers bring needed gear.

Wheeled carts can help volunteers to safely move heavy or unwieldy materials without undue risk to arms and backs. In addition, plan to have on hand:

- first aid kit(s) - including saline solution for rinsing eyes
- spill kit -- at minimum, have on hand a container of cat litter for absorbing hazardous liquids
- water – preferably a hose or other source of running water
- fire extinguisher
- cell phone(s) and pertinent numbers (police, fire, Metro, etc.)

To minimize exposure to hazardous materials at neighborhood cleanups, safety experts suggest the following:

- communicate a “no toxics” policy in all advertising for the event
- have volunteers ask people what they are dropping off. Use a cleanup intake form and specifically ask about hazardous materials and recyclables (see Appendix 8)
- ask customers to open (and empty, if necessary) opaque plastic bags or closed boxes for inspection
- refuse to accept any sealed metal drums, unidentified containers or obvious toxics like chemicals, caustic cleaners or pesticides

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- if in doubt, refuse to take it. Residents may take up to 35 gallons of household hazardous waste free to a Metro Transfer Station for proper disposal
- have a plan in place for what to do with hazardous items that slip through. Sturdy boxes or plastic tubs are good resources for containing toxics.
- use the “PEP” approach in response to toxic contamination: protect **P**eople, the **E**nvironment, and **P**roperty – in that order.

Communicating clearly

The best-laid plans are wasted unless effectively communicated to everyone concerned. Begin your safety program before your cleanup with e-mail, mail, telephone and/or in person (i.e., training) contact with your volunteers. Let them know:

- what to expect
- what to bring
- what hazards they might encounter.

On the day of your event:

- greet and assign volunteers to their tasks as they arrive
- review safety policies and procedures with them
- remind them about the importance of looking after their own safety when lifting and moving materials
- make certain they know what to do, and who to go to, in case of injury or spills, or if they encounter a “customer service” problem that they can’t readily resolve
- have them complete and sign liability release forms
- at neighborhood cleanups, have trained volunteers rather than customers unload vehicles
- at neighborhood cleanups, accept only loose debris in bags or boxes.
- keep local agencies and authorities in the loop. Inform the local police and fire departments about the cleanup event. This is not only common courtesy, but also helps them to prepare for possible traffic issues created by vehicles entering and exiting the site.

And finally...

Metro’s staff includes safety experts with years of experience planning for and responding to the adverse events that can result from cleanups. Don’t hesitate to contact them for advice on any potential safety issues of concern to you.