



White Paper

# Overcoming Multi-Family Dwelling Recycling Challenges

## **A Simple Solution to a Prevalent Problem**

Recycling rates in apartments and multi-family dwellings (MFD) are low due to difficulty implementing effective recycling programs. With more people renting and living in apartments versus single-family homes, this problem is growing.

## **Increase in Renters**

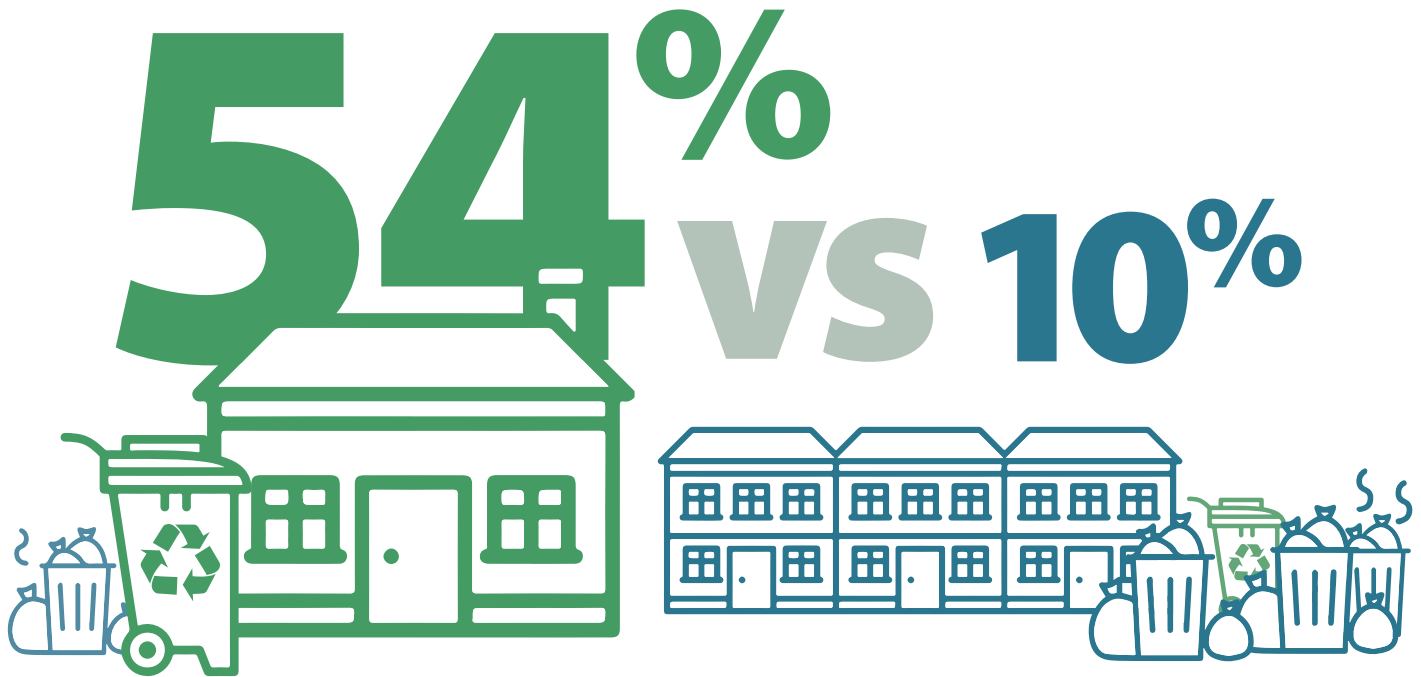
This migration to rental living versus homeownership is likely a result of the Great Recession (2007 - 2010) when the total household formation rate dropped to 500,000 annually. Conversely, by 2011, the number of households forming increased to 1.1 million (Dunne 2012).

More households were forming, but opting for living in rental properties. In 2012, there was an 8.75 percent vacancy rate in MFD, down from 11 percent in 2009 (Dietz 2013). More recent National Multifamily Housing Council data shows that 34 percent of the U.S. population are now renters, with 61 percent of renters living in multi-family dwellings (American Community Survey 2017).

Basically, as the economy rebounded, more people moved into their own places. It appears the majority of renters preferred multi-family apartment buildings or apartment complexes versus single-family rental homes.

# Recycling Rates in Multi-Family Dwellings

More renters are placing increased demands on multi-family dwelling recycling programs. This is a significant problem because these programs were falling short even prior to the influx of renters. A 2011 study in King County, Washington found recycling rates in single-family homes was at 54 percent, compared to just 10 percent for multi-family dwellings (KC 2011 SWMP).



## The Average American Disposes of...

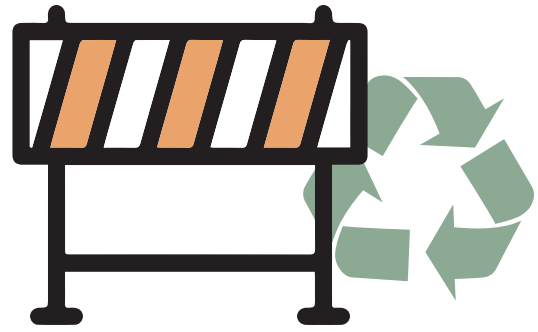
4.4 pounds of personal waste per day (EPA 2011). More renters means more recyclables and trash are being generated in multi-family dwellings, but most of these materials are being landfilled. In order to capture these recyclables and ensure they are properly diverted to recycling facilities, it is necessary to understand why recycling rates in MFD are so low.



## Barriers that Inhibit Recycling in Multi-Family Dwellings

A variety of factors contribute to the low recycling rates typical in apartments and other multi-family dwellings.

- **A lack of community recycling infrastructure.** MFD recycling programs are less likely to be mandatory, so landlords and property managers may not have a system in place for tenants who wish to recycle. Inconveniently located collection bins, poorly labeled bins, or a lack of collection bins deter tenants from recycling.
- **A lack of awareness and outreach.** Oftentimes, tenants do not understand where to bring items for recycling and/or are unsure which materials can be recycled.



- **A lack of appropriate storage space in apartments.** This issue is cited as a significant barrier to tenant participation in recycling programs (Lane and Wagner 2013). Tenants need to store items for recycling in their apartments and need a way to transport recyclables from their apartment to a community collection bin or recycling area. MFD tenants are seldom provided with an appropriate container or vessel which can be used to collect and transport recyclables (Folz 1991).

## Solutions to Recycling in Multi-Family Units

An effective apartment recycling program needs to be convenient and address the barriers deterring tenants from recycling. When it is easy to recycle, even people with low environmental concerns will recycle.

- Property management can establish an accessible area to collect items for recycling. The ideal location will be centrally located and easy for tenants to enter. Bins should be clearly labeled, so tenants know how to sort and where to place items. For instance, if paper or cardboard need to go in separate bins, but glass, plastic and metal can all go in one bin, that must be clear.
- Education and outreach efforts surrounding the recycling program are essential. Property management can post signage throughout a complex or facility to inform tenants about the recycling program. This signage should use inclusive messaging to create a social norm and spirit of community. Property management



should also encourage a dialog with tenants to provide feedback to fine-tune the program to meet needs and address any challenges unique to the community.

- A major barrier to tenants' recycling is how collecting recyclables in their apartments and transporting items to the collection point is managed. Property management can provide tenants reusable recycling bags. These bags make collecting recyclables in an apartment convenient and easy to carry items to collection points. A study conducted in the city of Bristol, in the United Kingdom, found that when tenants were given reusable recycling bags, the recycling tonnage increased 77 percent in a three-year period (WRAP 2018). A similar initiative in Toronto, Ontario saw recycling in MFD increase from 13 percent to 20 percent over four years after renters were given reusable recycling bags (Toronto Solid Waste Management Services).

# Advantages of Reusable Recycling Bags

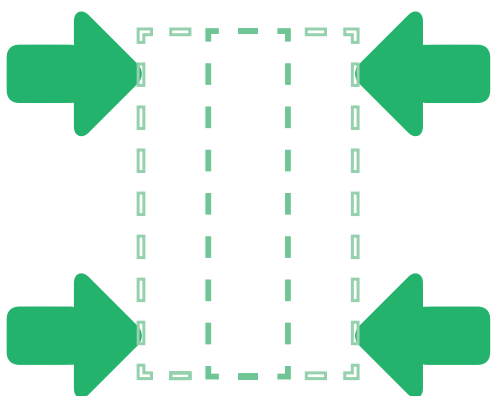
Reusable recycling bags address a lot of the recycling barriers tenants face in multi-family dwellings. Design, construction, the ability to customize messaging, and the price point for property management and recycling programs to economically provide bags, make reusable recycling bags a viable solution to increase recycling rates in MFD.

## Convenience

Reusable recycling bags provide a way for tenants to store and transport items for recycling. This simple solution is easy to implement and effective. When tenants have a convenient way to recycle, they are more likely to recycle.

## Collapsible

Compared to a bulky rigid plastic bin, the collapsible ability of reusable recycling bags make them an ideal solution in apartments with limited storage. Tenants have the convenience of folding the bag when empty, using very little space when not in use.



## Handles

The handles add additional functionality to the design. Long dual handles make the bag easy to carry, even when tenants' hands are full. For instance, if a tenant is also carrying trash bags or items too large to fit in the recycling bag (like broken down cardboard boxes), they can easily carry the reusable recycling bag on their shoulder via the long strap handles. A handle on the bottom of the bag makes it easy to empty the contents into a collection bin.

The dual handles can also be used to hang bags in closets, on a coat rack, or even from a door knob. Hanging reusable recycling bags keep them close by and convenient for tenants to use. Getting the bags up off the floor also minimizes messes, ensuring contents are contained within bags to keep living spaces tidy.

## Eco-Friendly Construction

In addition to reusable bags making recycling easy in multi-family dwellings, they are eco-friendly by being made from recycled content. Plus, reusable recycling bags typically last for several years. When they do wear out, they can easily be recycled, making these bags all the more green.

## Customization

Everything from bag dimensions and handle length, to artwork on all sides can be customized. This allows municipalities or property management companies to go from concept to final tote to meet all of their brand and messaging objectives. Being able to customize a recycling bag will make the bag more useful to each unique application and give encouragement to tenants to recycle.

Printing directly on bags educates and communicates to end-users the desired messaging.

This eliminates the extra expense of printed flyers, inserts, and other materials, which often get separated or thrown away.

Useful messaging, such as what can/cannot be recycled, how to recycle,

where to recycle, items that are not accepted in the apartment recycling program

(like batteries, electronics, paint, appliances, etc.), and contact information for recycling questions can be featured on bags. The City of Beaverton, Oregon, for example, distributes reusable recycling bags with printed recycling instructions to all residents, including instructions for handling various recyclable items. Reusable recycling bags become a source of information to further assist tenants while encouraging multi-family dwellers to recycle.



## Cost Effective

Reusable recycling bags are a cost-effective recycling solution for multi-family dwellings. The level of customization and the quantity ordered contribute to the final cost, but these bags can cost as little as about \$1 per bag. Hard plastic recycling bins, common in single-family home curbside recycling programs, cost significantly more. How bags are used and cared for will ultimately determine how long they last, but given regular wear and tear, reusable recycling bags should last a few years. Reusable recycling bags deliver an excellent return on investment and provide an effective recycling solution in multi-family dwellings.



Learn how to create custom reusable recycling bags to simplify the process by visiting [BeginWithTheBag.com](http://BeginWithTheBag.com), or by calling 1-866-222-0949.

.....

**Sources:** Dunne, Timothy. 2012. "Household Formation and the Great Recession" Economic Commentary, Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. Published Aug. 23. <http://www.clevelandfed.org/research/commentary/2012/2012-12.cfm> · Dietz, Robert. 2013. "Multifamily Housing Growth Posed to Continue in 2013." US News: A world report. Published Feb. 13. <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/homefront/2013/02/13/multifamily-housing-growth-poised-to-continue-in-2013> · 2017 American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates, US Census Bureau. Updated 10/2018. <https://www.nmhc.org/research-insight/quick-facts-figures/quick-facts-resident-demographics/#Structures> · KC 2011 SWMP · EPA, Municipal Solid Waste in the United States: 2010 Data Tables and Figures. [https://archive.epa.gov/epawaste/nonhaz/municipal/web/pdf/msw\\_2010\\_factsheet.pdf](https://archive.epa.gov/epawaste/nonhaz/municipal/web/pdf/msw_2010_factsheet.pdf) · Lane, Gordon and Wagner, Travis. 2013. "Examining Recycling Container Attributes and Household Recycling Practices." Resources, Conservation and Recycling 75: 32. · Folz, David. 1991. "Recycling Program Design, Management, and Participation: A national survey of municipal experience." Public Administration Review 51, no. 3: 222-231. · The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP). 2018. "Recycling in Flats Everyday." <http://www.wrap.org.uk/content/recycling-collections-flats-methods-improving-performance> · 3Rs Ambassadors Program, Toronto Solid Waste Management Services. <https://www.toronto.ca/services-payments/recycling-organics-garbage/apartments-condos-co-ops/> · In the Bag! City of Beaverton, Oregon. <https://www.beavertonoregon.gov/615/In-the-Bag>.