

Best Practices for Labeling Waste Containers

Focus on RCW 70A.205.750

Washington requirements

When waste ends up in the wrong place, it costs money and makes recycling less effective. Consistent container colors and clear labels can make waste sorting easier and more accurate. Now it's Washington law, too.

[Washington passed a requirement for solid waste containers to have “clear and conspicuous labels.”](#) by January 1, 2028. Labels must be on both the container and lid.

At minimum, the law requires labels on solid waste containers to have the primary material category, such as garbage, recycling, or organics. Labels must also use the state's waste color code for collection containers.

Haulers and local governments can use text, graphics, or both on labels. This focus sheet bridges the law's requirements with research about the most effective labeling practices.



Figure 1 This recycling label meets the law's requirements, but it does not use some of the recommended practices.

General best practices for labeling

Combine visuals and text – Labels that use icons or pictures work better than text-only signs.

Consistency is key – Keep labels or signs the same whenever possible.

Focus on the allowed items – Including unaccepted or prohibited items can cause confusion, especially when using graphics. Organic waste labels are the exception.

Adapt labels when appropriate – Consistency is key, but some labeling practices work better for certain waste types or settings.

Make public containers stand out – Noticeable waste containers get used more often.

Consistency builds confidence

Consistency is critical for effective waste sorting. It helps people build confidence in their sorting decisions and reinforces them over time.

Using the same label across communities is one way to keep consistent. If labels can't be the same, match colors, icons, fonts, and layouts across different versions.

There are other ways of being consistent too. For example, place labels in the same position and location across containers, so people don't have to search.



Figure 2 The nonprofit Recycle Across America is working with the National Parks Service to adopt consistent-looking labels across national parks.

Designing a waste container label

Effective waste container labels are simple. People often spend only a few seconds deciding where to put their waste. While the law only requires labels to have the primary material category, we suggest including more specific examples.

Research supports using photos or icons of 8 – 10 allowed items on a waste container label and focusing on the most common items. In general, photos work best. However, they can inadvertently narrow a user's understanding – for example, a photo of newspapers might lead people to exclude paper bags or other printed paper.

Graphics help overcome language barriers, and providing translations also assists those with limited English proficiency (LEP). Several resources have information about languages spoken in a geographic area including the [American Community Survey](#) and the [Washington Emergency Management Division's LEP application](#).

Large, bold, and simple fonts help people with visual impairments. Use high-contrast colors for better readability.

Labels on garbage containers

State law requires using black or gray on garbage labels for either the background or text color. Showing people what you want them to put in the garbage helps keep recycling and organic waste cleaner.



Figure 3 Thurston County Public Works Solid Waste Division shows residents what to put in their garbage carts using photos in their sorting guide.

Labels on recycling containers

State law requires using blue on recycling labels for either the background or text color.

Preparation reminders like “empty and dry items” are better for residential and business settings rather than public containers.



Figure 4 This recycling label from nonprofit Recycle Across America uses white text with blue background for high contrast. The label is simple and focuses on what materials are most common.

Labels on organic waste containers

State law requires using green or brown on organic waste labels for either the background or text color.

Graphics may not be as clear for organic waste, so pair them with short clarifying text. Focus on the most practical items for the setting, like yard waste on single-family residential carts.

Adding “do not include” text has shown to be most effective for organic waste.



Figure 5 City of Tacoma tells residents what not to include in their yard waste guide, but they only use photos for allowed material.

Public waste containers and labels

Public bins that stand out are used most often, so making them noticeable and placing them strategically can cut down on litter. If a container doesn't have a lid, keep labels near the top of the container and put them on all sides. Consider installing a sign nearby at eye-level.

Changing the shape of the container opening can cause people to slow down. Smaller openings are recommended for recycling and organics containers. Taking more time to read labels can lead to more accurate waste sorting.

Putting different kinds of waste containers in the same location is also critical. Co-locating recycling and organic waste containers with garbage containers makes it easier for people to sort in one place, rather than make multiple stops.



Figure 6 Putting different kinds of waste containers in the same place helps in public places and during large events.

Labels on large containers

Containers that hold more than one cubic yard must have a label that is one square foot or larger. The label text must be five inches or larger.

Make labels last

Stickers and heat stamping are the two most common ways to label waste containers.



Figure 7 A garbage cart with a heat stamped label next to a recycling cart with a faded sticker.

Stickers are less expensive but need to be replaced more often. Flaking stickers may also pollute the environment. Clean and dry the container surface before applying a sticker and choose UV-resistant options for the longest lifespan.

Heat stamping is more expensive upfront but can last the entire life of the container. Higher costs may make it difficult to stamp more than the primary material category.

Some haulers are interested in trying heat stamped QR codes that link to a web resource with more information about what is allowed. We found no studies that looked at this approach.

Labeling checklist

- Use the state color code for different types of waste plus other colors with high contrast
- Include simple graphics for 8 – 10 items
- Pair graphics with short text
- For containers larger than 1 cubic yard, label is 1 square foot with 5-inch text
- Show only allowed items, not prohibited
- Keep labels consistent wherever possible including layout and placement
- Choose durable labeling options that stand up to the conditions (e.g., weather, pick up)
- Put labels on lids and containers

References

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- The effect of color preference and noticeability of trash bins on waste collection performance and waste-sorting behaviors. [doi: 10.1016/j.wasman.2020.12.010](#).
- York University Circular Innovation Hub, [Best Practices for Recycling in Public Spaces](#).



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