

**LAKE COUNTY NEWS-SUN**

## **Waukegan, Zion recycling awareness program making strides: ‘This is what we were hoping to see’**



Checking a recycling bin in Waukegan as part of a SWALCO pilot program to educate people about the best recycling practices are Frank Pettis, left, and Jeff Williams. (Steve Sadin/For the Lake County News-Sun)



Three weeks into a pilot recycling education program in select neighborhoods of Waukegan's First and Second Wards, as well as a pair of Zion subdivisions, people are apparently getting the message with a 30-point improvement in Waukegan and a 25-point increase in Zion.

Frank Pettis, the owner of GreenLit Solutions, is running the Recycle Education and Outreach (REO) program for the Solid Waste Agency of Lake County (SWALCO) focused on Waukegan, North Chicago and Zion.

Checking recycle bins for items that cannot be recycled, Pettis pointed to one on Helmholtz Avenue. Three weeks ago, 90% of the materials were in plastic bags, and 50% to 60% of all items could not be recycled. He does not knock on doors, but the owner came outside to talk to him.

"She thought she was helping by putting everything in plastic bags," Pettis said. "She didn't want everything to fall out on the street. Now there are no plastic bags in her bin. She understands what to do."

Pettis and his team of canvassers found a significant drop in the contaminants in recycling bins on Friday on the south side of Waukegan as the REO program in Waukegan and Zion finished its third week educating residents by leaving tags on bins with contaminants.

Canvassing in North Chicago is scheduled to start in the spring, Pettis said.

Funded through a \$2 million grant to the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, SWALCO Executive Director Walter Willis directed an \$83,000 subgrant to fund an effort in the three cities.

Waukegan Mayor Sam Cunningham said in a text that the partnership with SWALCO is a way to proactively educate the community about "responsible recycling practices" to minimize what goes to the landfill.

"As we implement citywide sustainability efforts, education is the key to help residents recycle correctly and reduce waste contamination," he said. "A little extra effort from each of us leads to a big difference for our planet."

Starting Oct. 7 in Zion and Oct. 9 in Waukegan, Pettis' team has been checking recycle bins in the designated areas for improvement. If there is compliance, nothing is done. If education is needed, a tag in English and

Spanish is placed on the container indicating the specific change needed.

On the front of the tag, the bilingual message is to place recyclables in a plastic bag before putting it in the bin. Improvement is suggested with a graphic and a message reading, "Collecting recyclables in a bag? Empty the contents into the cart. Return plastic bags to retailers."

A compliment for a clean bin is on the reverse side with a box beside it for a check mark, along with six boxes which can be checked for the wrong item plastic bags or wrap, tangler cords, hoses or chains, scrap metal, foam or bulky items.

"This is about education and outreach," Pettis said. "We don't want it going immediately into a penalty," he added, referring to waste hauler LRS's policy of removing the recycle bin on the third violation. "It is their policy, but we're working with them on this too."

In the first week of the canvas, Pettis said 50% to 60% of the 800 to 1,000 homes canvassed in the First and Second Wards of Waukegan had contaminants in the bins. During the second week, the number dropped to between 35% and 40%, and by Friday it was between 30% and 40%.

In Zion, Pettis said his team was canvassing two 230-home subdivisions. In the first week of inspections, 45% of the homes had improper items in their recycle bins, but as of Wednesday — the end of the third week — the number declined to 30%.

Peter Adrian, SWALCO's recycling coordinator, said he is happy to see improvement by taking a gentle, direct communicative approach. The goal is to keep as much out of landfills as possible.

"This is what we were hoping to see," Adrian said. "Meeting homeowners like this at the street level is the best way to do it. This is how you make it successful."

Once the initial canvases in Waukegan and Zion are complete, Pettis said he plans to analyze the data and determine the best next steps as the program continues. The multiyear effort will continue.

Adrian said he hopes to see the program expanded to more neighborhoods and a continuation of communication in the existing areas.