

Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

DAY-OF a Cleanup – What to Do

Setup

- Cleanup Bin, trash grabbers, gloves
- Table
- Coffee, water, snacks
- Extra bags for encampment residents to fill (if applicable)

Registration & Check In

- Participants must sign the waiver when they arrive.
- If a participant is under 18 and is not with their parent/guardian: You can have the participant call their parents. Verify the parent gives their verbal consent for their child to participate in the activity for the day, and then you can put your initials and “verbal confirmation, phone call” next to it.
- If you are at a site that has an encampment nearby and folks would like to participate but refuse to sign a waiver, it is okay to let them participate without signing.
- Please cover the intro, pick and choose the history and impacts that you find interesting and relevant, and then be sure to go over all of the safety guidelines.

Sample Script

Intro

Welcome to *location* in the watershed! We’re excited to have your help in the effort to keep this part of our community clean. I’m with *your organization* and we’re here today with *partner orgs*. If you have any questions about who we are or what we do, just ask, and we will answer any questions y’all have.

Add any info here specific to your cleanup day, your organization, etc.



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Why are we here

- The average person in the US produces 4.9 lbs of trash/day. That adds up to a total of 292.4 million tons of trash created in the US every year.
- When trash is not disposed of properly it ends up polluting our streets, parks, wild spaces, and eventually our waterways.
- There are multiple garbage patches, but the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is the biggest. It is a floating mass of plastics in the Pacific Ocean (between our coastline and Hawaii) that is now more than twice the size of Texas, or three times the size of France.
- It is estimated that every year, over 2 million tons of trash enter the ocean by flowing through rivers.
- Plastic is the most commonly found material in cleanups worldwide! 8 out of the top 10 items found in cleanups are single use, disposable plastic items.
- Cigarette butts have been in the list of top ten items found in CA trash cleanups since the 1980s. It moves up and down in the rankings, but it's always there.

Safety Talk

- Avoid large drums, dead or injured animals, and human waste.
- If you choose to pick up syringes, needles, and sharp objects, please do not empty your bucket on the tarp. Make sure you dump it out separately, call over one of the leaders of today's cleanup, and have them put the items in their sharps container. If you choose not to pick up these items, mark their location and tell your site captain where they are.
- Wear gloves and closed toe shoes at all times. Never touch trash with bare hands.
- Teamwork makes the dream work- Don't lift anything too heavy! If something is too heavy for a group of 2 to move, report the location to the site captain, who will report the location to appropriate city or county staff.
- Stay in teams of at least two, or in sight of others in your group.
- Avoid overexertion, sunburn, heat exhaustion, and dehydration. We suggest you take your water bottle with you. If you choose to leave it here at the check in site, make sure you are returning often to drink water.
- All children under the age of 13 need to be supervised by an adult.
- Watch out for poison oak. Leaves of 3, leave it be!
- Leave all "waste" where it is, along with any associated tissues. Talking both human and animal, unless it's in a dog waste bag

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Encampment Safety & Compassion, if applicable

The number of people experiencing homelessness in California has been on the rise for more than 15 years due to a variety of social and economic factors. Between 2017 and 2024, homelessness increased 39 percent in California, to a total of more than 187,000 people. As a result, the number of unhoused people residing in encampments has risen, which can be in areas where creek cleanups are held.

Folks living in encampments are just as much a part of our community as you and I, and we hope you will treat them, their possessions, and their spaces with the respect you expect to receive.

- Stay about 20 feet away from active homeless encampments. You wouldn't want anyone walking into your home or your yard and taking your belongings; show that same respect to our residents living in encampments.
- How do I tell if an encampment/tent site is active?
 - Are there people there?
 - Are there temporary structures that are standing? Tarps, tents, etc
 - Are the items you see fresh, or have they been affected by weather over a long term? For example, covered in mud, half buried, etc.
- If you see things that are in very good condition and could be reused, we recommend hanging them over a fence, or laying things out on the ground so people can see them.
- Bottles with liquids are to be left closed and put directly into the landfill cart.
- Another reminder for y'all to NOT pick up tissues or organic waste that is not in a doggy bag. Yes, we're talking about human feces.
- Clothing, pillows, etc. must go in the landfill cart
- If you find a shopping cart, please pull it out of the water and leave it next to your trash bins.

*Set your site boundaries here. Where can people go, where should they not go.

If you are sorting and recording weights of your landfill, recycle, and compost: As your buckets fill, please return to this spot to sort through your trash. Please be patient, as we will be recording the trash found to help us keep a record of what is picked up in our area throughout the years. We currently have ____ years of cleanup information that helps guide policy change and advocacy not just locally, but in the State of California.



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While Volunteers are Out

Ideally, cleanups should have two people (Site Captains) that are in charge.

- Site Captain One:
 - Stays near the table and equipment to continually welcome new volunteers
 - Explains to passersby what is happening, who all these people are, and why we are here
 - When people fill their buckets or bags with trash and come back, this person can either help the volunteers sort through trash and put it in the correct bin (if applicable) or help make sure all bags and other collected trash is stacked up and ready for pickup in the correct spot.
 - This person is the emergency contact if something goes wrong- they are closest access to the road and can guide emergency personnel
- Site Captain Two
 - Walks around and engages with volunteers
 - Makes sure everyone is having a good time
 - Keeps everybody safe
 - Answers volunteer questions during the cleanup
 - Takes photos of volunteers in action
 - Ensures respectful distance is kept from any active encampment or tent sites, if appropriate, OR
 - Makes sure all interactions with encampment residents are compassionate, safe, and respectful

Sorting (if applicable)

Dump all buckets onto the tarp, fill separate buckets with landfill, recycling, and compost, weigh each of the buckets, record the weight, and dump the bucket into the appropriate roadside cart. Then at the end, add up all the bucket weights for each category and enter it onto your data form.

If it is windy, have people sort through their own bucket and put items directly into the bins, making decisions and learning about their local waste management streams as they go. In this case, you will need to take a photo of how full each roadside cart is at the end of the day. There is a way to estimate weight of landfill, recycling, and compost by looking at how full the bins are.

- 95gal trash cart ~70lbs full
- 95gal recycle cart ~70lbs full
- 65gal compost cart ~50lbs full



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Reporting to Attendees

At the end of the cleanup, report out to your volunteers how many pounds of trash they picked up and saved from being swept downstream and into the ocean. The immediate statistic will help them feel a sense of accomplishment and impact, and is likely to bring them back for another event.

Trash Removal

If using individual landfill, recycling, and compost bins, it's important that the trash collected is removed as soon as possible to avoid contamination of waste streams.

If you aren't sorting, leaving the dumpsters there for a day or two often doesn't hurt, especially if there are any encampments nearby that could use the dumpsters after your event is finished.

