

# Trash it SAFELY

Proper disposal methods can help protect sanitation workers



By Laretta Claussen

**Few people** give thought to the sanitation workers who come in contact with our trash once it is placed out in our driveway or alley. Yet every year a number of sanitation workers receive injuries on the job that we could have helped prevent. Knowing how to properly dispose of certain household items can make things safer for homeowners, the environment and, most of all, sanitation workers.

## Know the rules

It can be difficult to know how to properly dispose of certain items because no federal regulations have been established. "Under federal law, state and local governments generally make the rules regarding what can be thrown out," said

David Biderman, safety director for the Washington-based National Solid Wastes Management Association. "Every state, every town, has a different rule."

Most communities have drop-off centers or specially designated days for household hazardous waste, such as chemicals and oils, and large items, including appliances and electronic waste. The best course of action is to research the rules in your area or contact your municipality to find out what can be disposed of and how.

## Chemicals

Assorted household chemicals can pose an environmental risk as well as a health risk to sanitation workers. "In April and May, people all over the United States

throw out their old pool chemicals and buy new pool chemicals," Biderman said. "And every April or May like clockwork, we'll see five or six [news] articles about sanitation workers that got sick from chlorine." Often, the label on a product will specify the safest means of disposal, as methods differ depending on the chemical ingredients.

For example, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, the safest way to dispose of leftover pesticides is to use them according to the directions on the label. If you have no use for them, ask a neighbor if they can use the chemicals. Pesticides should never be disposed of by pouring them down the drain, into the toilet or down the sewer. If you have remaining chemical products

that cannot be used, contact your local municipality's solid waste disposal authorities.

The EPA further warns consumers to not reuse empty chemical containers. Throw empty containers directly in the trash unless an alternate disposal method is recommended on the product label.

### Sharp objects

Throwing out sharp objects can be a problem for sanitation workers, particularly when the homeowner puts garbage out in plastic bags rather than in a garbage can. "Not every homeowner is putting their trash in a container where the risk of exposure is lessened," Biderman noted. "If it's in a bag, needles, broken glass, broken knives are a risk to the workers."

To mitigate this risk, Biderman suggests homeowners wrap or somehow encapsulate the sharp materials to avoid the risk of sanitation workers suffering cuts or, in the case of used syringes, being exposed to potentially hazardous substances.

"As the population of the United States gets older, there are more and more users of household syringes," he noted. "We're actually seeing a slight increase in syringes in the waste stream."

Biderman says a simple remedy is to place used needles in plastic containers such as old laundry detergent bottles before placing them in the trash. However, he does caution homeowners to be certain to not place plastic bottles containing needles in the recycling bin.

### Hot ash

When homeowners use a fireplace in colder months or barbecue in the summer, disposal of hot ash becomes an issue. Ash can remain hot and ignitable for up to four days after burning. "This ash can cause a fire in the load, which poses a workplace hazard to the workers on the truck and a potential environmental hazard," Biderman said.

The National Fire Protection Association in Quincy, MA, says ashes must

be completely cooled before being disposed of in a metal container.

### CFLs

Compact fluorescent lightbulbs can last longer and save on energy consumption, but they contain a potentially serious environmental risk: mercury. Although the mercury is not hazardous while contained in the bulbs, it can pose a serious risk if the bulb breaks and releases the substance.

Many municipalities and other agencies have programs to safely collect burned-out CFLs. Contact your local authorities to find a CFL disposal program in your area.

### Lighten the load

Biderman contends that a greater danger than what you load in your garbage is how you load it. The rate of cuts and acute injuries, he said, "is relatively small compared to musculoskeletal injuries." Lifting and dumping excessively large

garbage cans can cause a great strain on sanitation workers.

"Homeowners who have manual collection should be sensitive to the fact that the garbage man is going to have to lift up that can or bin and throw the contents in the back of the truck," Biderman said.

Local laws usually set a limit on the weight of garbage cans, although these are often ignored, according to Biderman. As large, 96-gallon garbage containers are becoming more common, people are inclined to put huge amounts of garbage in individual containers, making it difficult for sanitation workers to handle the load.

Homeowners, Biderman said, "can reduce the incidence of injuries to garbage collectors by making sure that they're not stuffing as much material as possible, particularly heavy material, into a container." When it comes time to put your garbage out, Biderman reminds homeowners that "smaller is better." **FS&H**

## On the road

"In addition to making sure what [homeowners] throw out is thrown out properly to reduce acute injury risk, people need to be more aware of the waste collection employees and vehicles when they're driving in their neighborhoods," said David Biderman, safety director for the Washington-based National Solid Wastes Management Association.

Although the trash itself poses a potential risk, the majority of fatal accidents sanitation workers experience is on the road. Injuries on the road are the highest-growing fatality rate in the industry. "We've had a number of fatal accidents where a worker has been pinned by a motorist to the back of the truck," Biderman said.

To combat this, the NSWMA started a "Slow down to go around" campaign, aimed at educating drivers on how to safely



share the road with garbage trucks. To prevent a potentially fatal collision, the campaign cautions drivers to:

- ✓ Slow down when approaching a garbage truck. If necessary, stop and allow workers to do their job before proceeding.
- ✓ Look for workers before attempting to pass the truck.
- ✓ Check for traffic approaching from the other direction before driving around the truck.
- ✓ Avoid distractions such as eating, changing the radio station or using your cell phone when on the road.