

Waste Management collaborates with law enforcement to sweep up crime

By Mary Anne Ruddis
Current Correspondent

Crime prevention is everyone's business and, as a company, Waste Management is taking that to heart.

On Aug. 2, Waste Management, in cooperation with local law enforcement and the cities of Spokane Valley and Liberty Lake, held training for 65 of their drivers to better prepare them to recognize when to alert police to a situation.

The program, known as "Waste Watch," puts neighborhood safety first. "The purpose of the training was to equip drivers to be an extra set of eyes and ears for law enforcement," stated Jackie Lang, Waste Management spokesperson.

Kelly Cuzzetto has been working for Waste Management for 25 years. As a lifelong Spokane Valley resident, he has seen some changes over the years. "There are more people on the street, more activity," he said.

According to Lang, the company has been holding daily "safety huddles" to talk about the need to vigilance and the Waste Watch programs expands that. The drivers have made dozens of reports over the years.

Jesse Granado, Waste Management district manager who organized the training, said the safety huddles launch specific topics such as watching for more children on the streets during the summer. The Waste Watch program goes further and provides additional training.

"For Waste Management, this is all about community partnership," Granado said. "Our drivers know their routes inside and out – so they notice when something is out of the ordinary. This is another way for us to step up as a community partner, to help make our local community feel stronger and safer."

Drivers' safety is a priority and Waste Management wants their drivers to know when to notify authorities. "They don't want us to leave the truck and confront someone but to pull to a safe spot and make a call," said Cuzzetto.

For Cuzzetto, the training helped reinforce the idea of not hesitating to call



Liberty Lake Mayor Steve Peterson and Waste Management Public Sector Manager Tami Yager attended a training last month as part of "Waste Watch," a program that educates Waste Management Truck drivers to watch for suspicious activity and notify law enforcement. The training included representatives of Liberty Lake and Spokane Valley police departments.

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when he sees something out of balance. "They told us, that is their job and to not hesitate to call," he said. "We know schedules and when people are on vacations. We need to be aware of our surroundings."

About three months ago, Cuzzetto had a reverse situation happen where he was able to be of assistance. The police were already on the street and he asked what was going on. They were looking for someone. Cuzzetto had just seen a man on the street running with a bag and he was able to point to the police to where he was hiding right around the corner. He truly was that extra set of eyes to help police find and arrest their suspect.

Spokane Valley Crime Prevention Officer Chris Johnston and Liberty Lake Police Officer Mike Thomas conducted the hour-long training. Liberty Lake Patrol Sergeant Darin Morgan said the training was to help drivers "be aware of activity and be cognizant of what is out of place – vehicles parked on the wrong side of the road or out of place, gates open and things that are out of the ordinary."

The program has received support from both Spokane Valley Mayor Rod Higgins and Liberty Lake Mayor Steve Petersen who both attended and observed the training. Both mayors arrived at 4:45 a.m. that morning to greet drivers and thank them for their service.

"The key to public safety is basically looking, watching, seeing and reporting," said Petersen. "Our garbage guys know our neighbors. The more eyes, the better."

Higgins agreed, saying that public safety is his "number one priority."

"I think this is very good training, very detailed, very focused," Higgins said. "I think it is valuable to the drivers and certainly to the citizens of Spokane Valley," said Higgins.

Formally coordinating with law enforcement through the training session provides police departments with an extra layer of awareness, Lang said.

"The program is making our community stronger and safer," Lang said. "With city budgets stretched thin, (the program) is an opportunity for Waste Management to help law enforcement dollars go a bit further."

Morgan said that the program makes it possible for drivers to "report in real time."

"They are in the streets at all hours and getting suspicious activity reports to law enforcement quickly can prevent crime," Morgan said. "We can help them know what to look for."

The program has been implemented in more than 100 communities across the country. Drivers are in the streets day and night. "(They) have helped locate missing children and are often first on the scene to report fires and call 9-1-1," said Waste Management Public Sector Manager Tami Yager, a resident of Liberty Lake.

Citizens are reminded to call 9-1-1 in cases of an emergency or a crime in progress. Crime Check 456-2233, is the local resource to report other crimes and concerns.