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United States  
Environmental Protection  
Agency

# Enhancing Facility-Community Relations



*Strengthening the Bridge  
between  
Hazardous Waste Facilities  
and  
Their Neighbors*



*With more than 2,260 hazardous waste facilities in the U.S., developing and maintaining good community relations is vital. It is important for facilities to maintain continuous, strong relationships with neighboring communities throughout their operation and after closure. Although not all communities are affected by federal hazardous waste regulations, for those that are, their concerns need to be addressed early, collaboratively, and compassionately.*

## **Establishing Trust**

Since the enactment of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) of 1976, both industry and government have learned the importance of developing and maintaining strong community relations during the siting and permitting of a new hazardous waste facility and when renewing or modifying permits at existing facilities.

Once a hazardous waste management facility is sited and operational, neighbors are reminded daily of its presence. This presence can greatly affect a community's spirit and motivation. For example, if a facility owner is slow to respond to or ignores a community's concerns, tensions may form. Conversely, if a facility owner continues to maintain open channels of communication and address community concerns promptly and honestly, a spirit of cooperation between the facility and the community is fostered, building a better place to live.

## **Continuing the Dialogue...**

**W**hen a facility receives its RCRA permit, the relationship between the facility and the nearby community is just beginning. The facility should continue to play a leading role by sustaining dialogue with neighbors, community groups, and local businesses. This continuous communication between a facility and its neighbors can be the key to a positive relationship. A steady, open dialogue is necessary to build trust and also to identify and address community concerns. It enables communities to voice their opinions about issues affecting them and allows a facility more opportunities to offer solutions and work with the community to achieve them.

## **Ensuring the Community's Well-Being**

**S**ome important questions facility owners should ask themselves about the community are:

How familiar is the facility's owner with the community's residents? How healthy are they? Are there home-bound individuals? Are there children in the community? Is there a seasonal population, such as retirees or migrants? Do residents have vegetable gardens, and do they fish locally? Do they keep livestock for milk and meat? How do they spend their leisure time? Are there any cultural or community issues or events that predate the facility's startup? Are there traffic safety issues?

Understanding and consistently addressing community health, environment, and quality-of-life concerns are important parts of being a good neighbor. When a facility gets involved with a community's interests and helps seek solutions to its concerns, a strong, productive relationship can be built. This relationship can generate mutual respect and awareness of each other's role in the community.



## How can you improve the community's well-being?

- Know your community: age distribution, lifestyle, general sources of income (e.g., farming, service, or industrial employers), children's play habits, and local game and produce eaten.
- Collect information informally on the public's exposure to other sources of harmful substances and note if some groups have increased exposures (e.g., farmers exposed to pesticides).
- Obtain anecdotal health information from long-term residents.
- Find out residents' opinions on how nearby facilities affect their health.
- Notify the community early of any accidental releases and your plans to clean up the releases.
- Be prepared to give a straightforward answer to public questions (e.g., "How dangerous is the facility to our residents?").
- Know the location of environmentally sensitive areas.
- Develop an understanding of the community's values and issues of most concern.
- Create employment or contract opportunities (e.g., catering, desktop publishing).

*Understanding is a two-way street.*

— Eleanor Roosevelt

*We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny...*



*...Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*

*— Martin Luther King, Jr.*

## How can you enhance your dialogue with the community?

- Continue to go the extra mile. Don't expect the community to come to you.
- Learn how residents communicate among themselves, and then stay connected with communities using their networks and groups.
- Identify values you share with the community.
- Always be open, clear, and honest with communities. If you don't have an answer to their question, let them know!
- Try to always be accessible. Hold "open houses" for the community on a regular basis.
- Publish a community newsletter or annual report to the community.
- Use local academic institutions to advance knowledge or improve dialogue, especially historically black colleges and universities, and institutions belonging to the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities.
- Be sensitive to culturally diverse groups. Understand that each culture sees issues differently.
- Hire an experienced facilitator with the same cultural background as those in the community, or someone who speaks the local language (if needed).

## How can you assure communities that you hear and will address their concerns?

- Appoint a community relations liaison person to continually raise community questions and concerns.
- Be clear about details, such as who owns the facility, who operates it, how long it will operate, where the waste comes from, and how hazardous the waste is.
- Develop a public communications plan with active input from the community.
- Negotiate and keep a current good neighbor agreement.
- Establish a complaint/question hotline and a response protocol.
- Involve the community early in all facility modifications.
- Continually monitor and coordinate land use with neighbors and existing and future businesses.
- Establish and stay actively involved in a community advisory panel.
- Routinely ask citizens what they think of the facility through annual surveys and focus groups. Let neighbors help design, distribute, evaluate, and report. This will help track the facility's performance with the community.

*This is the third document in a series of U.S. EPA Office of Solid Waste & SWI publications on hazardous waste management facility locations if they relate to social and environmental issues. For more information, read*

*Social Aspects of Siting RCRA Hazardous Waste Facilities, EPA530-R-00-035, April 2000.*

*Sensitive Environments and the Siting of Hazardous Waste Management Facilities, EPA530-R-97-003, May 1997.*

*Both are available at <http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/docs/site/site.htm>.  
or order paper copies from the RCRA Mail Center at 1-800-424-9346.*



**Are there ways you can continually enrich and improve the community's quality of life?**

- Ask the community to suggest new ways to enhance its members' quality of life.
- Investigate and get the community involved in helping you address nuisance concerns (odors, noise, aesthetics).
- Find out from the community what is needed to establish a sense of community and belonging and follow through with it.
- Continually work with residents to improve the economic value of their community.
- Help community residents establish a community garden.
- Take an active and consistent interest in the community's employment and education concerns.
- Welcome and respond to suggestions on how your business can help the community.
- Stay abreast of the location and needs of culturally significant properties as well as common lifestyle practices.
- Visibly participate in community events (e.g., have a booth at local festivals).
- Sponsor or provide community grants or scholarships (e.g., tuition for "Send a Kid to Camp" and child enrichment programs).
- Participate in community agency initiatives; volunteer to serve on nonprofit boards.



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Official Business  
Penalty for Private Use  
\$300

**EPA/530/F-02-037**

*September 2002*