



Austin, Texas

Program Summary

Austin Resource Recovery (ARR, formerly the Solid Waste Services Department) rolled out the pilot for its home composting program on Earth Day 2010. In 2011, the *Austin Resource Recovery Master Plan* set a goal to distribute composting bin rebates to 10% of ARR's approximately 200,000 customers.¹ ARR gathers data and releases annual analysis reports that recommend how to improve the program's overall success and cost effectiveness. ARR uses the recommendations to make yearly adjustments to the program's components.

In the beginning of the program, customers of ARR's trash and recycling services were eligible for a 75% rebate up to \$75 on the purchase of any home composting bin if they completed a composting class in-person or online and reduced their garbage collection cart to the 32-gallon size option. Free kitchen compost collectors were also initially available to residents taking the class in-person, but are no longer available.²

In 2014, ARR added a voucher option to the program. The \$75 voucher is valid for any home composting products at participating retailers in Austin. Each household is eligible for either one rebate or one voucher. As of 2014, all Austin residents who pay the Clean Community Fee (a required fee for all residences) are now eligible for the vouchers/rebates, meaning that all people, including those living in multi-family residences, can now participate.

ARR no longer requires residents to reduce their garbage collection cart to the 32-gallon size to get a composting bin voucher/rebate, but the department still encourages its customers to compost at home to reduce their monthly waste

▲ At a composting workshop, an ARR employee shows how residents can use rebate/vouchers to obtain different types of home composting systems. *Source: Austin Resource Recovery*



POPULATION:

947,890

PROGRAM START DATE:

2010

BIN TYPE AND PRICE TO RESIDENTS:

Rebates for any bin, and vouchers for any bin available at participating retailers – up to \$75

BINS DISTRIBUTED:

4,870 vouchers and rebates (see Table 6)

TRAINING AND EDUCATION:

Training required to obtain bins

1 Austin Resource Recovery Master Plan, December 2011, available online at: https://www.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Trash_and_Recycling/MasterPlan_Final_12.30.pdf.

2 Sylba Loren, "Home Composting Rebate Program Year13," January 31, 2013.

hauling bills. (ARR's home composting program web page states, "By recycling and composting, you may be able to downsize your trash cart – the smaller the cart, the less it costs! To change your trash cart size, call 512-494-9400. The City of Austin will deliver a new cart to your house at no extra cost.")³ ARR customers can potentially decrease their monthly garbage collection rate from \$42.85 (for a 96-gallon cart) to \$17.90 (for a 24-gallon cart).

Budget

ARR's budget for the composting program is flexible. See Table 6 for annual expenditures.

Staffing

ARR has one dedicated Senior Planner who manages the program. That position is supported by a Program Specialist who assists with administrative tasks on the composting program as well as other programs. ARR's Marketing and Public Information team supports the composting program in the production of outreach materials and the placement/purchasing of advertisements.

Partners

Five different local outdoor and hardware retail businesses for voucher use; rebate option allows participants to purchase from any retailer

Impact and Benefits/Costs:

589.68 tons of organics diverted and \$17,000 in saved tipping fees (annually)

ARR staff conducted a small-scale study in 2013 to calculate the average diversion rate per voucher/rebate. They asked customers receiving vouchers/rebates to volunteer to track and report the quantity of material they diverted from the trash to their backyard composting bin. Participants received color-coded bags and a weigh scale. Each week, the volunteers separately recorded the weight of their trash and the materials they put in the compost bin. ARR found that the volunteers diverted an average of

5.4 pounds per week (a diversion rate of 54%).

ARR had dispersed 4,200 vouchers/rebates as of August 2016. Program subsidized compost bins thus potentially divert 11.34 tons (22,689 pounds) per week and 589.68 tons annually of organic materials from Austin's waste stream. Austin is charged a tipping fee of \$28.95 per ton. The home composting program is saving the City of Austin up to \$17,000 in estimated tipping fees annually.

TABLE 6. AUSTIN PROGRAM COSTS AND IMPACTS

Year ^a	Total Cost	Class Attendees	Total Classes	Rebates
July 2009-10	\$14,711.96	481	12	153
July 2010-11	\$12,967.69	597	21	352
July 2011-12	\$89,761.73	4,217	129	923
July 2012-13	\$19,681.36	861	43	768
July 2013-14	\$47,936.17	672	49	736
July 2014-15	\$ 40,109.50	466	27	581
Total 1	\$185,058.91	7,294	281	3,513
July 2015-16	N/A	N/A	N/A	628
July 2016-17	N/A	N/A	N/A	729
Total 2	N/A	N/A	N/A	4,870

a Year is July 1 to June 30.

Source: Austin Resource Recovery 2016

Marketing and Outreach

ARR has experimented with a wide variety of marketing and outreach methods for its backyard composting program and is always making adjustments to its strategy to improve effectiveness and cost efficiency. The program's most expensive year was July 2011 to June 2012 (FY 2012) (see Table 6). The majority of the expenses (\$56,740.60) – of the more than \$89,000 spent that year – were on marketing and outreach. Though more people took classes and claimed rebates in FY 2012 than any other year (see Table 6), this increase in participation was not proportional to the growth in expenses.⁴ As a result, ARR cut back on advertising for its FY 2013, but implemented a more targeted outreach approach.

3 "Home Composting Rebate Program | Austin Resource Recovery | AustinTexas.gov - The Official Website of the City of Austin," accessed April 13, 2018, <http://www.austintexas.gov/composting>.

4 Loren, "Home Composting Rebate Program Year13."

Effective and Cost-Efficient/Free Marketing Options

For July 2014 to June 2015, ARR asked all rebate and voucher claimants to report how they had heard of the program. Table 7 summarizes this data along with the cost spent on that specific advertising method for that year and the calculated cost per rebate. The table shows that online advertising is the most effective and cost-efficient method, and that radio and magazine advertisements are highly ineffective and cost inefficient. ARR has cut back on future newspaper, magazine, and radio advertisements to save money.⁵

Table 7 shows that postcards are one of ARR's most cost-efficient outreach methods (second only to online advertising). In September 2012, ARR sent out postcards to customers who already used 32-gallon size trash cans and were thus eligible for a backyard composter rebate. In the month that the postcards were sent out, more rebates were utilized than any other month the rest of the year.⁶

Some of ARR's marketing and outreach are free to the City: partnering retailers in Austin that accept the program vouchers promote the discounted bins (highly effective), ARR attaches notifications to customers' utility bills (fairly effective), and ARR conducts outreach at the department's booths at farmers' markets (less effective) (see Table 7).

Training and Education

ARR's online and in-person home composting workshops include an introduction to the concept of zero waste, basic instructions on backyard composting, an explanation of ARR's cart pricing tiers, and a review of eligibility criteria to qualify for the rebate. Similar to marketing and outreach, ARR has frequently adjusted its approach to home composting training over the years to increase effectiveness.

For the in-person classes, ARR contracts directly with composting experts to teach in a variety of sites. ARR seeks to be as efficient as possible in reaching the highest number of residents with the workshops by choosing the

TABLE 7. AUSTIN HOME COMPOST PROGRAM MARKETING METHODS

Advertising Means	Cost (\$)	Rebates Received	Cost/Rebate (\$)
Online ^a	8,500.00	172	49.41
Compost Retailer	-	109	-
Friend or family	-	90	-
Newspaper ^b	11,060.00	48	230.42
Post Card	1,136.35	47	24.18
Utility Bill		27	-
News	1,000.00	4	250
Farmers' Markets	-	3	-
Radio	3,048.00	3	1,016.00

a Refers to those who answered with "online," "Internet," "City Website," "ARR website" or "Google." These applicants may have been impacted by targeted online ads or emails.

b Refers to those who responded with "Austin Chronicle," "Statesmen," "Community Impact" or "Newspaper."

Source: Austin Resource Recovery 2016.

locations and times of the workshops based on analysis of participation rates of past years.

Workshop Instructors

In the first year of the program, ARR contracted with a third party company to teach in-person workshops. In 2011, ARR decided that it would be more cost efficient to directly contract with local instructors with a background in composting.⁷ Also in 2011, ARR hired a temporary planner to assist with program expansion and class instruction and started providing classes in Spanish.

In 2014, ARR added the option for community members to hold their own classes using materials provided by ARR, with the choice to teach the class using the online class video, an AV projector presentation, or a handout fact sheet on composting. Community members sign up online, choose which materials they would like to use, and then ARR emails that person the appropriate attachments and an Eventbrite link.

5 Loren, "Home Composting Rebate Program Year13."

6 "July 14 Composting Rebate Program" (Austin Resource Recovery (ARR), August 2014).

7 Ibid.



▲ ARR employee conducting an outdoor composting workshop and showing how to use kitchen pails to hold food scraps. Source: Austin Resource Recovery

Choosing When and Where to Hold Composting Workshops

In the beginning of the program, ARR held workshops at farmers' markets, public events and city hall. In 2011, ARR started offering more frequent classes at a wider variety of locations and classes by request for schools, nonprofits and businesses. In 2012, ARR noticed that classes held at places where a large amount of people would be going normally, such as farmers' markets, city hall, and libraries, had the highest attendance rate. Thus, ARR phased out classes where less people were attending and increased the amount of classes held at these popular locations.⁸

In 2015, ARR held all classes at farmers' markets, but findings from the 2015 annual report recommended that the program's operational costs could be lowered by decreasing the amount of classes offered at farmers' markets, where the city had to hire a contractor for set up and take down, and re-incorporate classes at locations such as libraries, community centers and event venues where there is already most of the needed equipment present (such as chairs and tables).⁹

Online Class

ARR's online class includes a 15-minute video and a questionnaire on composting basics that participants must fill out and send in with their rebate/voucher application (see Appendix A). The video class was first offered in FY 2011, and in every year since FY 2012, more people have taken classes online than in person to qualify for vouchers/rebates. About 60% of vouchers/rebates claimed in Austin have come from the online class. In FY 2015, 83% of the rebates came from online class attendees. These findings inspired ARR to improve the quality of the class video in FY 2015.¹⁰

Tips for Replication

- Make participation as easy as possible.
- Offer education to help people understand how to compost and get their questions answered.
- Provide a financial incentive to help people get started.
- Link to pay-as-you-throw pricing system. As people divert more materials from their trash carts, they can downsize, saving money.

Contact

Ashlee Fisher, Senior Planner at Austin Resource Recovery [no longer with ARR]

Links

Home Composting Rebate Program

<http://www.austintexas.gov/composting>

Composting Information

<http://www.austintexas.gov/department/composting>

Home Composting Online Class

<https://youtu.be/mBFMxFtsjfs>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "July 2014-2015 Composting Rebate Program Analysis and Recommendations" (Austin Resource Recovery (ARR), n.d.).

¹⁰ "July 2014-2015 Composting Rebate Program Analysis and Recommendations."