

## Waging the Waste War Neighbor by Neighbor

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You recycle newspapers, bottles, and cans. You try to use public transportation. And you always reuse your plastic shopping bags.

That's as much as any busy person can do for the environment, right? Wrong.

Welcome to Global Action Plan, a program that helps people live more efficiently and reduce household waste.

Here's how it works: Neighbors meet every two weeks, follow a special workbook, and share environment-saving tips like weather-stripping windows, installing low-flow toilets, and putting in energy-saving fluorescent lights. The price per person is \$35 for the workbook.

Participants say it strengthens community ties and helps families cut down on costs.

This household approach to living less wastefully may not be the single answer to world pollution. In fact, over the past 10 years, demand for recycled products has fluctuated, with high costs for collection and processing.

And it's not a program that will help you save a lot of money, although most people do save from \$200 to \$400 a year, says founder David Gershon. Rather, Global Action Plan is for people who simply want to improve their neighborhoods and preserve resources for their children.

Working together in neighborhood "EcoTeams," participants report, on aver-



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**GO TEAM!:** Members of the Belmont [Mass.] ecoteam put together and start up a compost bin made of recycled plastic. The group promotes ecologically friendly ways of living and is part of a nationally coordinated movement.

age, sending 42 percent less garbage into the waste stream, using 25 percent less water, cutting 16 percent of their carbon-dioxide output, and using 15 percent less fuel for transportation.

Dan Ruben, a health-care administrator in the Boston area, joined the program four years ago. He's reduced his household waste to four small trash bags a year. The rest is disposed of through composting and recycling.

"Ecoteams help you change your habits," he says. "Once you learn how much waste you use, you generally don't want to turn back."

So how do people get involved? Global Action Plan works primarily with city contracts. Staff members start by identifying 10 interested citizens in a city that has a contract with the group. Each

of the 10 invite neighbors to their homes to tell them about the program. Teams are formed and meet for four months. The program also provides information to about a half dozen separate, self-managing EcoTeams around the country.

Proponents say more-efficient living habits will help chip away at a mountain of waste. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, in 1996, Americans generated 210 million tons of municipal solid waste (including paper, packaging, food scraps, yard scraps, and other waste from homes and offices). All told, it amounts to 4.3 pounds of junk per person per day.

"Individuals are a major cause of the breakdown of the global ecosystem, and we are a major part of the solution," says Mr. Gershon, who started the nonprofit Woodstock, N.Y.-based program in 1989.

"In the past, people pointed at business and said, 'You are the problem,' and pointed at government and said, 'You are the solution,' and they have avoided taking responsibility.... But clearly the individual impact is huge."

But now, individuals are pitching in to solve the problem. In Portland, Ore., in spring 1997, 10 Global Action Plan ecoteams (55 households) reduced garbage output by 50 percent, indoor water usage by 26 percent, household energy use (gas or electric) by 8 percent, and saved \$227 per household yearly. Now in its third year with the program, Portland hopes to double participation by year's end.

Kansas City, Mo., has contracted with the program for about a year and has made significant garbage and water-use reductions. The hope is to extend the program's contract another three or four years.

The goal in these city contracts is to reach 15 percent of the citizens in a medium-sized community or, in cities, 15 percent of the citizens in 15 percent of the neighborhoods (in three to four years), according to Gershon. By then, the program will spread on its own momentum, he predicts.

At a first-year cost of \$90,000, cities get the equivalent of 1-1/2 staff people, an office, and administrative help. For the second, third, and fourth years, the price is \$30,000 to \$60,000 more. Other cities participating include Chattanooga, Tenn., Issaquah, Wash., Columbus, Ohio, and Bend/Deschutes County, Ore.

People will have an incentive to be more committed to the environment, says Gail Anderson of the Kansas City Department of Environmental Management. "When you're in an ecoteam, you get homework assignments and report the next week to your fellow teammates that you got something done," Ms. Anderson says.

The neighborliness keeps people involved. "Someone may say, 'I'll go to the hardware store and help you look for composters if you help me put up my weather-stripping,'" Mr. Ruben says.

At meetings, members discuss five subjects: garbage, water, energy, transportation, and consumption. Participants take on projects at home and measure their savings as a group. The final meeting is devoted to spreading the word to others.

The program has been recognized by the United Nations Environment Program; those who take a certain number of actions receive a certificate and pin from the organization.

Once all the sessions are over, people don't usually slack off. "Once you learn a new habit, you learn to stay with it," says Gershon.

On one evening in Belmont, Mass., an EcoTeam gathers in Ken Siskind's home. The group includes two mothers, a retired couple, another retired woman, and a single man. With homemade banana bread to munch on, the group discusses home water usage and transportation. Mr. Siskind passes around bus schedules and shares anecdotes about the joys of bicycling to work. He's started a "car diary" and records the mileage for every family trip. He's trying to combine all errands in one outing. Checking car tire pressure, he adds, also helps cut down on costs. "It's one of those things that doesn't take a lot of time, but can reduce the cost for your miles per gallon," he says to the group. "That seems like something real simple, but it's real easy to forget."

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## Environmental Tips For Around the House

### Bring your own bags

To reduce packaging, create a "bring your own" kit by putting some reusable durable containers in a cloth bag. Use them for food take-out, bulk food purchases, and doggie bags. Keep them in a convenient place in your car.

### Turn off the tap

Letting water run while you wash your face, brush your teeth, and shave wastes water. Turn off water or run at low force when needed, and simply turn it off when soaping up or brushing.

The average shower uses 5 gallons per minute. That means you can save 25 gallons of water by taking a 5-minute shower instead of a 10-minute one.

Most lawns need only 1 inch of water per week. Place three empty cans at various spots on your lawn. Turn on the sprinkler and time how long it takes to fill each one 1 inch. Add the three times and divide by three. That's how long it takes to water your lawn.

### Tune up the furnace

A heating system can waste 30 percent to 50 percent of the energy it uses if it's not operating efficiently. Oil furnaces need a tune up annually; gas furnaces should have one every two years.

Install compact fluorescent light bulbs that use about 70 percent less electricity and provide the same amount of light as standard bulbs. While compact fluorescents are more expensive, they will last a lot longer than incandescent bulbs.

### Try a 'swap party'

Instead of heading to the mall, call friends and neighbors to invite them to a "swap party." Exchange things like clothing, household items, and furniture that are in good condition but are no longer needed or wanted.

■ From 'Ecoteam: A Program Empowering Americans to Create Earth-Friendly Lifestyles,' by David Gershon with Andrea Barrist Stern.