

A visit to the Calhoun County Recycling Center

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Part of an occasional series

Sarah Kelly took me to the C&C Landfill in Convis Township months ago to learn about the partnership that provides additional recycling options for Calhoun County residents. Dressed in neon vests, Sarah showed me how trucks roll in to be weighed before they rumble on to drop their load on the hill. Right there, near the front office, is a giant, blue recycling container.



Sarah Kelly is the coordinator for Calhoun County's Solid Waste and Recycling Program. (Photo by Lucy Blair)

Sarah explained that citizens can come through the front entrance with the garbage trucks, provide a pass to the office and continue to this bin where they can leave their household recycling. No sorting is required and there's no cost to county residents.

"This program is a great asset to the community because the landfill is open six days a week," said Sarah, coordinator for

Calhoun County's Solid Waste and Recycling Program.

Sarah is dedicated to providing convenient recycling options and building a competent recycling program overall.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Sarah works alongside volunteers at the Marshall Recycling Center. She is extremely

knowledgeable about best practices and understands Michigan's recycling landscape. She sits on the Michigan Recycling Coalition policy committee, discussing potential expansion to the state's "bottle bill" and researching possible changes to electronics regulations.

As communications manager for Calhoun County overall, I grab every opportunity to talk about recycling because of Sarah. She is a bubbly subject-matter expert who makes recycling feel manageable.

Sarah taught me that unsorted recycling can be pricey and problematic, making it much more complicated than it was when I was growing up.

In the last few years, the narrative has shifted as China decided it would not take American recycling products that are poorly sorted. China was tired of picking through our trash for usable material and began denying "contaminated" loads.

For context, curbside recycling can be 20-25% contamination and China has a limit of .05% contamination. With less demand as China says no, the onus is placed on American companies (or programs) to sort through the recycling

better so that the material will sell. Other countries are following China's lead in requiring near-perfect sorting of recycled materials.

That is to say that the recycling industry is finicky and ever-changing. In October 2019, the county's recycling centers in Albion and Marshall stopped accepting bottles or jars that are not clear, blue or green. These items melt at a different temperature than the rest. This redirects containers for berries, lettuce, mushrooms and more into the trash. That might feel strange for seasoned recyclers, but it's tied to market conditions in the region. The plastics that are accepted are recycled into new bottles at a factory in Dundee, Mich.

Proper recycling requires keen observation, investigation and sorting. Sarah tries to make the process as easy as possible with events throughout the year to accept the range of products residents might be looking to recycle. Folks with televisions or computers waiting to be recycled can go to the Albion-area collection April 25 or the Battle Creek collection Aug. 22. There are three scrap tire collections from April to June for people who have passenger vehicle tires they need to get rid of.

All county recycling events can be found at www.calhouncountyclerycling.com.

Recently, I visited the Marshall Recycling Center located on 15 Mile Road on an average Tuesday. In previous conversations, I had heard that the center keeps busy, but I was surprised to see that the line to drop off items stretched through the Road Department parking lot, almost to the street. Steadily throughout the day, there were a dozen cars in line. Sarah, two part-time employees, and the volunteers moved people through quickly. Drivers stayed in

their cars while the staff pulled cardboard and bags of bottles from the trunk, taking them into the fenced-in area to sort.

Sorting through these materials at the Recycling Center isn't pretty. Although most of the items coming into the recycling center are in clean and dry condition, Sarah has alarming stories about the materials they've found, such as dead mice or bats, containers full of breast milk and bathroom garbage including feminine hygiene products and enema dispensers.

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"I strive to make the recycling that comes into the center the highest grade possible because I recognize the time and effort residents put into collecting it and hauling it to our center," said Sarah.

"It's really a team effort with the center staff working with the public to make sure we can increase our recycling rate and keep these valuable resources out of the landfill."

Sarah is patient with residents who are angry they can no longer recycle dark-colored plastics and with me asking questions about what actually qualifies as household hazardous waste. Sarah's patience makes proper recycling possible in Calhoun County. She is passionate about the work she does and committed to understanding its complexities, ensuring this county is a leader in recycling statewide.