

# What We Heard Report Single-use Item Reduction Bylaw Supports for Charities

City of Edmonton, Waste Services  
Waste Reduction Strategy  
Single-use Item Charity Supports  
May 2024  
[edmonton.ca/singleuse](https://edmonton.ca/singleuse)

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**Edmonton**

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## PROJECT OVERVIEW

Charities were exempted from Edmonton's Single-use Item Reduction Bylaw 20117 (the Bylaw) when it was passed by Edmonton City Council in October 2022. However, as of December 2023, Canadian charities are required to meet Canada's Single-use Plastics Prohibition Regulations, prohibiting the distribution of plastic shopping bags and foam plates, cups and containers. Edmonton's Bylaw was amended in November 2023 to align with Canada's restrictions.

To understand how charities are affected by these regulations, and to determine how the City could support impacted charities, Waste Services engaged affected Edmonton charities to solicit feedback on their compliance challenges. A survey and virtual feedback session were conducted, resulting in five planned support tools for charities (see What Happens Next).

- A best practices document for charities, which will be posted on the Charities and Exemptions page at [edmonton.ca/SingleUse](https://edmonton.ca/SingleUse)
- The opportunity for organizations to sign up and be listed as accepting reusable bag and reusable item donations from the public on [edmonton.ca/SingleUse](https://edmonton.ca/SingleUse), "Charities and Exemptions"
- A printable poster describing acceptable conditions of a donated reusable bag, listed on [edmonton.ca/SingleUse](https://edmonton.ca/SingleUse), "Businesses and Events" and "Charities and Exemptions"
- Guidelines for setting up a "take a bag/leave a bag" system, listed on [edmonton.ca/SingleUse](https://edmonton.ca/SingleUse), "Businesses and Events" and "Charities and Exemptions"
- Adding a link to the Reuse Centre's Acceptable Items list on [edmonton.ca/SingleUse](https://edmonton.ca/SingleUse), "Charities and Exemptions" to help organizations find or donate useful items.

Charities are also invited to join the [Waste Reduction Network](#), which helps organizations share best practices, address common challenges and collaborate on waste reduction initiatives.

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

WS surveyed 63 charities identified as those most impacted by the changing regulations as they use many single-use items to serve their community members. A total of 28 charities (and 29 representatives) completed the survey, and 19 expressed interest in a further discussion session. WS officials met virtually with 12 charitable organization representatives on April 12, 2024. This What We Heard report outlines the results of the survey and of the follow-up engagement session.

## WHO WAS ENGAGED

After consulting City of Edmonton's Community Services, which regularly engages with service-oriented charities, we connected with the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary

Organizations to help identify 63 affected organizations to engage. WS also reviewed 14 informal interviews with charitable organizations conducted in 2021, prior to the launch of Bylaw 20117.

Engagement focused on charities offering: food hampers, food delivery, support for unhoused and vulnerably housed, and childcare and/or community support.

## HOW WE ENGAGED

To understand compliance challenges and desired support, WS collaborated with the Research and Public Engagement teams to create and issue an online survey. Key stakeholders were determined and qualified by phone and/or email. The survey was emailed to the 63 charities on February 8, 2024 and it remained open until February 26, 2024 (The survey was not offered as an open link on edmonton.ca in order to maintain quality data).

The Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations shared the survey link to its 2,000-plus Capacity Builder newsletter subscribers on February 22, 2024. Waste Services also invited the Edmonton Public Library Outreach team, Inclusion Alberta and the Spinal Cord Injury Association of Alberta to participate in the survey.

After the survey results were reviewed, a virtual engagement session was held on April 12 to present survey results, clarify requirements of the Bylaw and federal regulations, and to discuss potential support resources.

## WHAT WE ASKED

### SURVEY

The 13-question survey was a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions. The purpose of the survey was to gather information about:

- Awareness of the federal Single-use Plastics Prohibition Regulations and Edmonton's Single-use Item Reduction Bylaw
- Types of single-use items most frequently used by organizations
- Organizational compliance challenges as a result of the new federal regulations and the Bylaw
- Best practices of compliant organizations
- Ways the City can support organizations
- Interest in participating in the upcoming focus group

## FOCUS GROUP

The focus group was held with 12 representatives who indicated, in the survey, interest in a group engagement session. The focus group's intent was to review the survey results, allow attendees to expand further on information provided in the survey and discuss potential City supports.

The group discussions focused on:

- Organizations' ability to comply with the Bylaw
- Organizations' best practices to reduce single-use items and comply with the Bylaw
- Suggestions on how the City could support organizations' waste reduction efforts

## WHAT WE HEARD | SURVEY

### Survey Respondents

The majority of organizations were in the social services field providing food services and/or shelter or housing support, closely followed by support for Indigenous peoples and public benefit.

### Regulation Awareness Levels

Respondents were largely aware of the requirement to comply with some parts of Edmonton's Bylaw (76%), while most also knew they must also comply with the federal plastics regulations (67%).

### Compliance Readiness Levels

Approximately half the participating organizations feel they fully comply with the federal regulations and the City Bylaw:

- 52% responded yes
- 28% responded no
- 20% responded I don't know

### Best Practices

Organizations that feel prepared to fully comply with the regulations and Bylaw were asked to share best practices or recommendations to help other organizations to adapt. Best practices included:

1. Sending clients who pick up food items reminder emails about bringing reusable bags.
2. Labelling and safely storing reusable items for regular clients so they can be reused each time the clients come to the organization.

3. Using the City of Edmonton resources and vendor recommendations found on the Charities and Exemptions page at [edmonton.ca/SingleUse](https://edmonton.ca/SingleUse).
4. Implementing a strategy to prevent reusable cutlery from being thrown out by mistake.
5. Asking the public for reusable bag donations.
6. Asking employees to bring their own reusable items to staff events.
7. Messaging participants about changes early and often, explaining rationale, and expecting change to take time.

### Commonly-used Items

The most commonly-used single-use items were identified as napkins, non-Styrofoam cups, cutlery, plastic shopping bags, plastic food containers, stir sticks and Styrofoam cups, plates and bowls. Plastic shopping bags and reusable bags are also used frequently by the organizations.

### Compliance Challenges

Participants cited **insufficient budget** to purchase and replenish items to comply as their biggest challenge (79%). Other compliance challenges included:

- Reusables are inappropriate for their clientele (57%)
- Inadequate supply of reusable or clean bags, boxes or containers (50%)
- Challenges integrating new reusables into existing infrastructure (43%)
- Insufficient staff to wash reusables (36%)

In the open-ended comments, organizations serving vulnerable populations mentioned that reusables are not appropriate to use when providing food or beverage services for safety reasons and because these populations do not have the means to store, carry or sanitize reusable items. Other organizations shared that clients who live with dexterity challenges have difficulty opening single-use items individually sealed in plastic packaging. Some clients also rely on plastic shopping bags for weather proofing items and/or to carry soiled clothing.

An opportunity identified in this section was a desire to build relationships with other organizations for support.

A misconception that stood out in the open-ended comments section was that flexible plastic straws are banned, when in fact these straws are [still available under certain conditions](#).

### Single-use Item Reduction Tools and Supports

Funding was identified as the most useful support tool for adapting to the regulations, followed by learning about best practices for compliance from other charities. Preferred supports were:

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- Funding to purchase reusable bags or similar reusable items (e.g. plastic totes) to replace stock of banned plastics (59%)
- Funding to purchase reusable plates, cups, containers, cutlery, etc. (55%)
- Information on best practices from other charitable organizations (52%)
- Funding to purchase dishwashing and sanitizing equipment (45%)
- Funding to subscribe to a reusable item company that distributes, manages logistics, and cleans reusable items for a fee (34%)
- The creation of a network with organizations to share reusable items or coordinate bulk purchases of supplies (31%)
- A resource highlighting list of food delivery companies that provide reusable containers or cardboard boxes at no cost, rather than single-use paper or reusable bags (31%)
- An “Accepting Reusable Item Donations” list at [edmonton.ca/SingleUse](http://edmonton.ca/SingleUse), which would allow organizations to request donations of reusable dishes, cups, utensils or bags (28%)
- Posters to inform patrons of operational changes as a result of the Bylaw and federal restrictions (24%)
- Information on how to safely use reusable items (21%)

## WHAT WE HEARD | FOCUS GROUP

### Ability to Comply with Bylaw

Eleven of the 12 organizations in attendance were in compliance with the Bylaw. One charity is working towards compliance but budget constraints are slowing down the process. While reusable cups for dine-in is not a requirement of charities, the desire to reduce waste by incorporating reusables into their operations was mentioned. One charity mentioned that due to inadequate washing facilities, it couldn't incorporate reusable dishware into its operations as per AHS food handling requirements.

A common challenge for organizations providing food delivery and hampers is the sanitary aspect of reusable bags. The organizations do not have the capacity nor infrastructure to properly wash and sanitize reusable bags, nor the finances to outsource this need. Additionally, it is not feasible for them to pass the cost of paper bags on to their clients.

### Single-use Item Reduction Methods

Reduction methods used by organizations vary based on their operations, budget and clients served. Suggestions included:

- Charging a bag fee to offset the cost of purchasing paper bags in a retail setting
- Preventing reusable cutlery loss in child care or school settings using such methods as:

- Offering incentives, like a chocolate bar, for each item returned
- Inventory management: counting cutlery, internal communication to help locate missing items (checking classrooms and children's bags)
- Inscribing cutlery so parents know to return them if children bring them home
- Budget for a certain percentage of loss and replacement
- Purchasing reusable dishes for staff meetings and events or asking employees to bring their own reusable mugs and/or containers
- Switching to condiment dispensers instead of individual condiment packages

### **Suggestions on How the City Could Support Waste Reduction Efforts**

Funding continued to be a common theme for supporting charitable organizations. Comments were as follows:

- Financial incentives for charities and non profits organizations who go above and beyond Bylaw requirements, for example, by fully transitioning to reusable or recyclable items in their operations.
- Grant funding to support reusable item purchases.
- Non-grant funding to support ongoing operating expenses of replenishing reusables that go missing.
- Asking Alberta Health Services to review restrictions that bar some facilities from providing reusable food serviceware to their clients.
- A list of low-cost washing and sanitizing companies for organizations that do not have capacity or infrastructure to clean reusable bags.
- Clarity on the rationale for why certain types of plastic bags, such as produce bags, are still allowed while new plastic shopping bags are prohibited.
- Information on Reuse Centre's available reusable items.

### **Identified Best Practices**

- Use low-cost suppliers for bulk purchases; three organizations<sup>1</sup> were identified:
  - B & G Products (local to Edmonton)
  - Costco
  - Hesco
- Reusable bags and boxes for food distribution
- Ask clients to work collaboratively to adapt to the change

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<sup>1</sup> Independent recommendations. The City of Edmonton does not endorse the organizations.



## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Due to budgetary restrictions, Waste Services committed to providing the following support tools:

- A best practices document for charities, which will be posted on the Charities and Exemptions page at [edmonton.ca/SingleUse](https://edmonton.ca/SingleUse)
- The opportunity for organizations to sign-up and be listed as accepting reusable bag and reusable item donations from the public on [edmonton.ca/SingleUse](https://edmonton.ca/SingleUse), “Charities and Exemptions”
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