

Survey of Thermostat Recycling Corporation (TRC) Wholesalers

Prepared by the Northeast Waste Management Officials' Association (NEWMOA)
June 2003

At the request of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the Northeast Waste Management Officials' Association (NEWMOA) completed a survey of the Massachusetts' HVAC and electrical wholesalers listed as participants in the Thermostat Recycling Corporation (TRC) mercury thermostat collection program. The project was done from February through June 2003. The purpose of the survey was to determine which wholesalers needed assistance in implementing the program, and to provide them that assistance.

Originally established by thermostat manufacturers Honeywell, General Electric and White-Rogers, TRC is a private corporation that facilitates the recycling of used mercury-switch thermostats. Under this voluntary, industry-sponsored effort, heating and cooling contractors drop off, free-of charge, any brand of old mercury-switch thermostats at participating wholesalers. The wholesalers collect the thermostats in bins supplied by TRC. When the bins are full, wholesalers send them to the corporation's recycling center where the switches are removed and forwarded to a mercury recycler.

Survey Method

NEWMOA obtained a list of the 55 participating electrical and HVAC wholesalers in Massachusetts from the TRC Web site. Of this list, NEWMOA attempted contact with 43, visiting 17 and calling 26. The 12 wholesalers NEWMOA did not contact include 4 that were not wholesalers (e.g., Center for Ecological Technology [CET], American Refuel, and Keyspan), 2 that were duplicate records and 2 that had gone out of business. Another 4 were set up by CET, and CET staff told NEWMOA that they wanted to contact these wholesalers themselves. Table 1 provides a summary of this breakdown.

TABLE 1: Wholesalers Listed as Current TRC Participants

HVAC and Electrical Wholesalers	Number of Wholesalers
Listed on TRC Web site as current participants	55
Out of business	2
Duplicate records	2
Not wholesalers	4
CET initiated	4
Surveyed by NEWMOA	43

Survey of Wholesalers Contacted by Phone

When calling the wholesalers, NEWMOA first asked to speak with the person in charge of the mercury recycling program. Often the person who answered the phone would

know who that was. If the person answering the phone did not know, NEWMOA asked to speak to the store manager.

NEWMOA then asked the person in charge of the recycling program or store manager to answer the following questions:

- Are you participating in the mercury thermostat recycling program?

If yes:

- How is the program going?
- How often do you fill the bin?
- Do you have any questions about the program?

If no:

- Why are you no longer participating?

Survey of Wholesalers Visited

NEWMOA visited 17 HVAC wholesalers:

- 6 in the Medford/Woburn area (northwest of Boston)
- 6 in and south of Boston
- 5 in Lynn, Peabody, and Salem (north of Boston)

At each wholesaler NEWMOA staff introduced themselves to the employee behind the counter, and inquired about the thermostat recycling program. If that employee was not knowledgeable about the program, he or she would usually find the store manager or another employee who could answer the questions. After conducting a brief interview, NEWMOA offered a copy of the TRC poster advertising the program, which NEWMOA printed from TRC's Web site.

NEWMOA asked the following questions in the interview:

- How is the program working?
- Where is the bin? (if it was not visible)
- How often do you fill the bin?
- Do you have any thoughts on how to increase contractor participation in the program? NEWMOA offered the following as possible ways to increase contractor participation: rebate, more advertising, and education.
- Would you be willing to send a mailer or flyer with your invoices to your customers?
- Do you know the proper procedure for cleaning up a mercury spill?

In addition to the poster, NEWMOA also handed out, or later mailed, 50 TRC flyers advertising the program to each wholesaler that indicated that flyers would be useful. NEWMOA also provided information on mercury spill control if the interviewee indicated he or she did not know how to clean up a spill.

Survey Results

Status of Wholesaler Participation in TRC Program (Called and Visited)

Table 2 presents the number of wholesalers who were, or were not, participating in TRC when NEWMOA called or visited them. For a complete list of the wholesalers, and the results of the phone calls and visits, see the Appendix.

Status of Wholesaler	Wholesalers Called	Wholesalers Visited	Wholesalers Called and Visited Combined
Still participating	15 (68%)*	11 (65%)	26 (67%)*
Not participating	7	6	13
Couldn't contact**	4	-	4
Total	26	17	43
Total excluding "Couldn't Contact"	22	17	39

*Percent determined using the total excluding the wholesalers that couldn't be contacted.
** NEWMOA left several messages for the person in charge of the TRC program, but never received return phone calls. One number was out of service.

Excluding the 4 wholesalers who could not be contacted, approximately two-thirds or 67 percent of the wholesalers both visited and called were still participating in the program.

CET informed NEWMOA that three of the four wholesalers it contacted were still participating in the program.

One-half, or 6, of the 13 wholesalers who were not participating in the program said they were not participating because they did not know about the program. One-third, or 4, said they had stopped participating because of little interest from contractors. One wholesaler had stopped participating because it dealt mainly with bathroom equipment and had never collected many thermostats. Two others did not give a reason for their lack of participation in the program.

Combining the 26 wholesalers NEWMOA identified as participating with the 3 wholesalers CET identified as participating, about half of all the wholesalers listed as current participants on TRC's Web site were actually participating (29 out of 55).

Quantity of Thermostats Collected (Wholesalers Called and Visited)

Of the wholesalers NEWMOA visited or called that were still participating in the program, about one-half (14), said that they collected a moderate or large number of thermostats, and half (12) said that they collected few thermostats or had never collected any.

Knowledge of Program (Wholesalers Called and Visited)

About 20 percent (5 of 26) of the participating wholesalers said they had full bins, but did not know what to do with them. This rate has decreased since NEWMOA conducted the survey of TRC's program in 2001, indicating the need for ongoing education.¹ In 2001, only 5 percent of wholesalers contacted said they did not know how to send a bin back to TRC.

How to Increase Contractor Participation (Wholesalers Visited Only)

When asked how to increase participation, those wholesalers that were still participating answered as follows (some gave more than one answer):

- 2 thought a contractor rebate would help; however 2 others thought a rebate would be too much administrative work
- 3 were getting lots of participation and did not feel a need to increase
- 6 felt that more education/awareness was needed; however 3 of these mentioned that even with education it was hard to motivate or interest contractors
- 2 had no suggestions.

Willingness to Send Advertising Mailer or Flyer with Invoice (Wholesalers Visited Only)

Nearly one-half of the visited wholesalers (5 of 11) that were participating in the TRC program at the time of NEWMOA's visit said that invoices were sent from their corporate offices, and that the corporate office would have to be consulted about sending advertising fliers with the company's invoices. Of the remaining 6 participating wholesalers, 2 agreed to include mailers with their invoices, 2 said that they would not, and 2 were unable to answer (they did not have the authority).

Knowledge of Mercury Spill Control (Wholesalers Visited Only)

None of the wholesalers that NEWMOA visited knew how to properly clean up a mercury spill.

Assistance Provided

NEWMOA provided the following assistance to the wholesalers it called and visited:

- Sent or handed-out TRC's wholesaler flyer with basic information on the program to 8 wholesalers and directed them to TRC's Web site. These wholesalers expressed an interest in starting up the program.
- Sent or handed-out contractor flyers to 8 wholesalers (50 to each). These wholesalers said they would work on educating the contractors they service.

¹ For more information, see "Review of the Thermostat Recycling Corporation Activities in the Northeast," NEWMOA, November 2001. <http://www.newmoa.org/Newmoa/htdocs/prevention/mercury/>

- Sent via fax instructions on how to return a bin to TRC to 6 wholesalers
- Asked TRC to send return labels to 5 wholesalers with full bins

NEWMOA also sent TRC change of address information for 9 wholesalers.

Of the 6 wholesalers that were not participating at the time of NEWMOA's visit, one agreed enthusiastically to restart its program, and two (that had never participated) said they would consider starting the program.

Outreach

NEWMOA identified 63 air conditioning and heating wholesalers and 144 plumbing and heating equipment wholesalers in Massachusetts through the Web site yellowpages.com. NEWMOA sent a letter to 195 of these inviting them to participate in the program. At TRC's request, NEWMOA withheld letters to Johnstone Supply, Grainger, Sid Harvey, and FW Webb stores. TRC said that it maintains ongoing relationships with the corporate offices of these companies.

NEWMOA drafted a trade magazine article on TRC's program for wholesalers and one article for contractors. The wholesaler article was sent with a photo of the participating wholesaler featured in the article to the *Supply House Times* and the *Air Conditioning, Heating and Refrigeration News*. The *Supply House Times* published the article and photo in its September 2003 issue. Several wholesalers that NEWMOA spoke with reported that the *Supply House Times* was the most popular magazine read by wholesalers. The article for contractors was sent to the *HVCA NewsLink*, a newsletter for HVAC contractors.

Lessons Learned

- The number of HVAC and electrical wholesalers currently participating in TRC's recycling program is substantially less than what the TRC indicates on its Web site. Only half of the 55 participants listed are actually participating wholesalers.
- Of the 43 wholesalers listed as current participants that NEWMOA surveyed with a visit or phone call, approximately one-third were no longer participating.
- Wholesaler collection programs have mixed success. About half of the wholesalers surveyed that were still participating reported that they collected a moderate to large amount of thermostats, while the other half reported that they collected very few. Nearly all of those that collected few thermostats cited lack of interest among contractors as the primary reason why.

Possible reasons for good collection programs include strong interest on the part of the wholesaler (e.g., Interstate Electric Equipment), lots of promotion for mercury recycling in the community (e.g., the Burlington wholesalers), peer influence (i.e., bins that are frequently full with thermostats may encourage other

contractors to bring in theirs), and the type of contractor the wholesaler services (i.e., contractors handling a higher volume of thermostats may be more apt to recycle). Conversely, some wholesalers in communities with strong recycling programs may collect fewer thermostats if contractors have other places to take them, such as the local DPW.

- Corporate wholesaler offices are not providing sufficient information or support on the recycling program to their branch stores. As a result, participation by branch offices is spotty and sometimes weak. Some branch stores knew very little about the program. Other branches defer decision making on the program to the corporate offices, but the corporate offices do not appear to actively promote the program.
- Many wholesalers do not understand well how the program works. For example, about 20 percent of those participating had full bins but did not know the proper procedure for returning a bin to the TRC. Three did not understand that they had to mail the bins back to TRC; they thought the TRC would come and pick up the bins. Two had mistakenly let customers take the bins filled with thermostats; one said that he did not know what the bin was for and had let a customer take it while the other said he thought that a Wheelabrator (Scanlon Associates) representative had collected the bin. It is likely that a customer took that bin as well because Scanlon Associates assured NEWMOA that it was not collecting bins from wholesalers. Several other wholesalers did not know what had happened to their bins, leaving open the possibility that customers had taken these bins as well—presumably to reuse the thermostats.

Two wholesalers thought that the program was for returning defective thermostats and said they already had a program for that.

Recommendations

- **Aggressively advertise the program to both contractors and wholesalers.** Possible means for raising awareness include sending letters to individual contractors, publishing newsletter articles in trade magazines; and attending local contractor association meetings. Target communities that are not covered by Scanlon Associates because many of these communities are developing municipal collection programs. (Scanlon Associates is the contractor to the Wheelabrator waste-to-energy facility.)
- **Research the barriers to contractor participation and develop a social marketing plan that addresses these barriers and provides some incentive for participation.** Note that some of the wholesalers NEWMOA visited were not enthusiastic about a rebate program for contractors because they thought it would mean more work for them.
- **Work with corporate offices of HVAC wholesalers to clarify/strengthen**

branch participation. Getting all the branch stores participating in the program could substantially increase the number of participating wholesalers. FW Webb, for example has 22 branch stores in Massachusetts, but only 6 are listed on TRC's Web site and, of these, only 4 are participating. Similarly, Grainger has 9 branch stores but only 2 are listed as TRC participants, and one of these is no longer participating. The Portland Group has 8 stores; 2 are listed as TRC participants, but neither appears to be participating.

- **Continuously maintain contact with participating wholesalers.** This is very important for keeping them interested in the program, especially for the wholesalers that collect few thermostats. Furthermore, employees change often, making it important to continue outreach to the participating wholesalers to maintain their involvement and understanding of how to participate in the program.
- **Follow up with the 10 wholesalers who asked for more information on the TRC program and indicated an interest in starting the program.** Personal contact is important in motivating them to participate.
- **Keep the TRC Web site updated. Post the instructions for returning bins on the TRC web page.** At least 5 wholesalers had full bins but did not know what to do with them. TRC does not presently post its one-page instruction sheet on how to return bins, but it does provide this information when a wholesaler initially joins the program.
- **Conduct outreach to the decision-makers at large housing authorities.** One wholesaler thought this could be fruitful because housing authorities purchase lots of thermostats.
- **Actively encourage homeowners to participate.** Homeowners should be encouraged to drop off mercury-switch thermostats at participating wholesalers.
- **Actively encourage retailers to participate, particularly large ones such as Lowe's and Home Depot.** Expanding the program to retail outlets may be an effective way to increase the number thermostats collected and recycled.
- **Place containers at household hazardous waste (HHW) facilities.** A significant number of mercury-switch thermostats are collected at HHW events and transfer stations in the states that sponsor those programs. By placing TRC containers at HHW facilities and transfer stations and allowing HHW vendors to mail thermostats collected in one-day HHW events or at permanent sites back to TRC, the number of thermostats collected through this program would increase.
- **Actively acknowledge the important role that state agencies are playing in promoting TRC.** By showing that the program has involved both state and TRC efforts, the Corporation may be able to foster increased state support.

APPENDIX: Detailed Results of Wholesaler Calls and Visits

TABLE 1: STATUS OF WHOLESALER'S PARTICIPATION IN TRC PROGRAM					
Wholesaler	Location	Has Bins	Participating in Program	Ever sent a bin	Comments
AIR PURCHASES INC.	BEVERLY, MA	Yes	Yes	No	Has a full bin now, the first in 2 years. Reports lots of interest from contractors.
AIR PURCHASES INC.	DEDHAM (moved from Boston)	No	No	?	Before they moved they were filling 1-2 bins/year. Lost the bin when they moved. Wasn't interested in starting again. Said contact headquarters.
AIR PURCHASES INC.	BROCKTON	Yes	Yes	No	Has collected only a few; not much interest from contractors.
AIR PURCHASES INC.	BURLINGTON	Yes	Yes	Yes	Lots of contractor interest; send in many bins
AIR PURCHASES INC.	HYANNIS	Yes	Yes	No`	Has never collected a thermostat.
AVON SUPPLY CO. INC	WAKEFIELD, MA	No	No	No	No longer participating. Didn't give reason.
BELL/ SIMONS CO	METHVEN, MA	?	No	?	Branch didn't know about the program and told me to call their corporate office. The corporate office didn't know about the program.
BERKSHIRE COUNTY PLUMBING	GREAT BARRINGTON, MA	Yes	Yes	No	Contractors don't participate much. He asked for flyers to hand out.
THE BOURNEUF CORP	LYNN, MA	Yes	Yes	No	Still have a bin, but it wasn't visible. Very few thermostats have been brought in.
CONTROL CONSULTANTS	WEYMOUTH, MA (formerly Braintree)	Yes	Yes	Yes	They get lots of participation.
COUNTY SUPPLY	LOWELL, MA	No?	No	No?	Didn't know about the program. Thought it was for sending back defective thermostats.
DUGAN SUPPLY	NEWBURY PORT, MA	Yes	Yes	No	Has only collected a dozen or so in 2 years. Has handed out flyers in the past. Contractors not interested. He'll keep trying.
F.W. WEBB CO	BURLINGTON, MA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Gets lots of participation from contractors.
F.W. WEBB CO	GLOUCESTER, MA	Yes	No	No	No longer participating. They collected a few 2-3 years ago. Contractors didn't seem interested and he's not interested in trying to get going again. Didn't understand how the program worked. Thought TRC would collect the bin.
F.W. WEBB CO	HAVERHILL, MA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Lots of interest. Send a bin every season.
F.W. WEBB CO	LOWELL, MA	?	No	No	Not participating currently, but would like to. Asked for information.
F.W. WEBB CO	PITTSFIELD, MA				CET is doing outreach to this wholesaler.
F.W. WEBB CO	SALEM, MA	Yes	Yes	No	Have a full bin now. Needs instructions on how to send.
FERGUSON ENTERPRISES	LYNN, MA	No	No	No	Warehouse manager did not know about the program. Was interested in participating. Asked for info.
FRANKLIN CITY PLUMBING	GREENFIELD, MA				CET is doing outreach.
G.S.G. SUPPLY CO. INC	HAVERHILL, MA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Currently have a bin ¾ full. They get good participation.

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Wholesaler	Location	Has Bins	Participating in Program	Ever sent a bin	Comments
GRAINGER INDUSTRIAL SUP	LAWRENCE, MA	No	No	?	New manager. Had no knowledge of the program Said he'd never seen a bin. Wanted info on the program.
GRAINGER INDUSTRIAL SUP	WOBURN, MA	Yes	Yes	?	They tell contractors about the program when they buy thermostats, but hasn't found much interest.
HEATING OIL PARTNERS (Alliance Express)	CHELSEA, MA	?	?	?	Contact is Joe Pepicelli. Was never able to speak to him.
HEATING OIL PARTNERS	EAST FALMOUTH, MA	?	?	?	Contact is Rick Maloney. Was never able to speak to him.
HEATING OIL PARTNERS	HOPKINTON, MA	Yes	Yes	?	Asked for flyers to hand out to contractors. Didn't know if a bin had ever been turned in.
HEATING OIL PARTNERS	WESTMINSTER, MA	Yes	Yes	?	Asked for flyers to hand out to contractors. Didn't know if a bin had ever been turned in.
INTESTATE ELECTRIC EQUIPMENT	BRIGHTON, MA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Gets lots of participation
JOHNSTONE SUPPLY	MEDFORD, MA	Yes	Yes	?	Bin was half full. They collect a moderate amount.
JOHNSTONE SUPPLY	WOBURN, MA	Yes	Yes	No	Has 2 full bins. Needs another. Didn't have the instructions on how to send in a bin.
LENNOX INDUSTRIES	WILMINGTON, MA	Yes	Yes	No	They've only collected 5 or 6, but they mostly ship out and don't get a lot of foot traffic. Corporate office does their invoices. Not interested in trying to increase collection, doesn't see how it benefits his business.
NORTH SHORE HEATING	LYNN, MA	Yes	Yes	No	They get very few thermostats. Someone came by to pick up the bin. They thought it was a Wheelabrator. Didn't understand how the program worked.
NORTHAMPTON PLUMBING SUPPLY	NORTHAMPTON, MA				CET is doing outreach to this wholesaler.
OIL EXPRESS DENNISPORT	DENNISPORT, MA	?	?	?	Contact is Rick Maloney. Was never able to speak to him.
PAMECO CORP	W. SPRINGFIELD, MA				Going out of business.
PEABODY SUPPLY CO	NORTH ANDOVER, MA	?	No	?	No one knew about the program. Told me to call the Peabody Office.
PEABODY SUPPLY CO	PEABODY, MA	No	No	No	Didn't know about the program. Asked for info.
THE PORTLAND GROUP (formerly called River valley Supply)	HAVERHILL, MA	?	No	?	No one knew about the program. Told me to call the branch manager, but he never returned the call.
THE PORTLAND GROUP	N. BILLERICA, MA	?	No	?	No one knew about the program. Told me to call branch manager, but he never returned the call.
R.E. MICHEL COMPANY, INC	MEDFORD, MA	Yes	Yes	?	Bin was ¾ full. They don't get lots of participation.
R.E. MICHEL COMPANY, INC	WORCESTER, MA	Yes	Yes	No	Has a full bin, but doesn't know where to send it.
S. & A SUPPLY	PITTSFIELD, MA				CET is doing outreach to this wholesaler.

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Wholesaler	Location	Has Bins	Participating in Program	Ever sent a bin	Comments
S.G. TORRICE CO	WILMINGTON, MA (formerly in Woburn)	Yes	Yes	No	Has a full bin, but didn't know what to do with it. Was enthusiastic to "reactivate the program."
S.G. TORRICE CO	BEVERLY, MA				Number no longer in service. Branches in Peabody, Franklin, Hyannis, Randolph, Wilmington
SALEM PLUMBING	BEVERLY, MA	No	No	No	They participated in the program for a year but collected very few thermostats. Not interested anymore.
SOUTH SHORE OIL HEAT SUPPLY	BRAINTREE, MA	Yes	Yes	No	Never filled a bin. Cite lack of awareness and possible competition with other recycling programs (through towns or Anderson Fuel)
SOUTH SHORE OIL HEAT SUPPLY	BROCKTON, MA	Yes	No	No	A customer came in and picked the bin up. They didn't understand how the program worked.
UNITED REFRIG	WOBURN, MA	Yes	Yes	Yes	They had a full bin and had previously sent in 2.
WEBB AIR	WOBURN, MA	No	Yes	No	FW Webb corporate office sent a letter telling them to participate in the program but they don't have a green bin. Have been collecting in a cardboard box. Have a full box and want to send it in.

TABLE 2: RESULTS OF VISITS TO HVAC WHOLESALERS

HVAC Wholesaler	Participating in Program?	Ideas for Increasing Participation	Willing to Send Mailer with Invoice/ Other Comments
Johnstone Supply, Medford	Yes (bin ½ full)	Advertise program better	Invoices are sent from Woburn office. Need to contact that office.
R.E. Michel Company, Medford	Yes (bin ¾ full)	Offer rebate	Invoices are sent from corporate office. Need to contact corporate office.
Grainger Industrial Supply, Woburn	Yes (few in bin)	Education	Invoices are sent from corporate office in Illinois. Need to contact corporate office.
United Refrigeration Woburn	Yes (full bin)	Contractors are using the service. No need to increase participation.	
Webb Air Woburn	Yes (full cardboard box)	None offered.	A corporate notice told them to participate in the program but they were never provided with a bin or instructions. Need to contact corporate office about sending mailer with invoice.
The Portland Group N. Billeica	No (no bin)	None offered.	Don't know what happened to their bin. They never got much participation from contractors.
Air Purchases Brockton	Yes (few in bin)	Offer rebate. Education would not be helpful. Contractors know.	Have only collected a handful of thermostats in 2 years. Maybe contractors take thermostats elsewhere. Invoices are sent from corporate office. They never got much contractor participation.
South Shore Oil Heat Brockton	No, but wanted to restart the program (No bin)	More awareness. Send flyer with bills.	Have never sent a bin in to TRC. A customer took the bin with the thermostats they'd collected recently. None of the employees knew the correct procedure or what the bin was for. He would consider sending mailers with invoices.
South Shore Oil Heat Braintree	Yes (few in bin)	More awareness. Send flyer with bills. No rebate. It would be more work for them.	Bin has never filled in 1 year. Some towns have good recycling programs. Some fuel companies (e.g. Anderson Fuels) also have collection programs. This may be why they collect few.
Interstate Electric Equipment, Brighton	Yes (full bin)	Contractors are using the service. A flyer could be useful, but not to send with bills.	Most contractors who use the service deal with a high volume of thermostats. They get lots of participation. Outreach to housing authorities to cut down sales of mercury thermostats. Did not want to send mailer with invoice.
Control Consultants Weymouth	Yes (few in bin)	None offered. The program is working fine.	They've sent in 3-4 bins. Their contractors are very interested in the program. They would send mailers with invoice.
Air Purchases,	No	None offered.	When they moved, they lost their bin.

TABLE 2: RESULTS OF VISITS TO HVAC WHOLESALERS

HVAC Wholesaler	Participating in Program?	Ideas for Increasing Participation	Willing to Send Mailer with Invoice/ Other Comments
Dedham	(No bin)		They had fair participation at their old location in Boston (1-2 bins/year). Not enthusiastic.
Salem Plumbing, Beverly	No (No bin)	None offered.	They mostly sell bathroom equipment and have a bathroom showroom. Tried the program but collected very few.
North Shore Heating Supply, Lynn	Yes (No bin)	More awareness.	They collect very few thermostats. Someone came and picked up their bin; they thought it was Wheelabrator. They did not understand how the program worked. No authority to comment on mailers with invoices.
Peabody Supply, Peabody	No (no bin)	None offered.	Didn't understand the program. Thought it was for defective thermostats. Asked for information on the program.
Bournef Corp, Lynn	Yes (bin not visible)	Publicize in local trade magazine, Progress. Contact the North Shore Plumbers Association; it holds monthly meetings...	Have only collected a few thermostats. They don't sell many mercury thermostats and his plumbers don't use them much. Said it's tough getting contractors to do anything. Not interested in sending mailer with invoice.
Ferguson, Lynn	No (no bin)	None offered.	Had no awareness of the program, but was interested and asked for information.