

# State of the Waste Industry: Recycling in the Age of COVID-19



The business of effectively separating recyclable material from waste has always posed a challenge. Sorting numerous materials mingled together is complex and difficult because of the machinery and workforce required. Since the advent of COVID-19 pandemic, recycling has become even more so; now, a dangerous element is added. That's true for consumers, municipalities, and the recycling industry.

The pandemic has changed the way we do almost everything, and that includes recycling. Athens Services has been proactive in adjusting to the times. Let's look at three critical areas where COVID-19 is affecting the recycling industry:

1. Recyclables, particularly paper
2. Worker safety
3. The role of consumers in positively impacting both

## The Problem with Paper

Cardboard is more essential than ever for shipping everything from personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical supplies to household goods and holiday gifts. According to the Los Angeles Times, since quarantine began and many establishments closed their doors, there has been a 15% decrease in recycled materials coming in to recycling facilities from commercial businesses and schools – two of the primary sources of recyclables. As a result, there is a massive shortage of paper and cardboard, the

EPA reports. This shortage affects the shipping of essential and consumer goods.

Even before COVID-19, Athens was diverting masses of paper from the landfill and collecting it for recycling. Having the latest innovative technology at its facilities, Athens produces some of the cleanest reclaimed recyclables in the industry. Recognizing early on that the need for cardboard had increased drastically during the rise of online shopping, Athens developed a program to accommodate the rise in cardboard use.

## Lending a Hand

Athens Recycling Coordinators (RCs) are personal waste educators assigned to each Athens account in Los Angeles. They assess how waste is managed and suggest ways to better reduce waste heading for the landfill. The RCs also educate customers on the programs Athens has to increase recycling.

One such program is the cardboard stacking service to increase recyclable cardboard yield. If a customer's recycling container is full and there are extra cardboard boxes that need to be disposed of, the customer can break down the boxes and stack them neatly on top of each other by the recycling bin. Athens will haul away the stacked cardboard free of charge. Customers know about this service from their RCs.

When the paper shortage became evident as a result of COVID, Athens had already put in the systems and groundwork with customers to produce the best recyclable cardboard yield possible.

## Safety First, Always

When we think of “frontline” workers today, we often picture healthcare workers and first responders. But workers who collect and sort recycling from trash are also prone to COVID-19 exposure because of contact with community members and contaminated materials.

Athens operates on the core principles of The Athens Way - service, people, and the environment. Priority is given to protecting and looking out for employees. During the pandemic, the health and safety of the employees is a primary concern. Once quarantine was announced, nonessential Athens workers were instructed to work from home.

Athens quickly sourced and created branded PPE for employees and customers, including facemasks for employees and hand sanitizers for all. Athens also focused heavily on educating and training customers on the proper way to dispose of recyclables so more can be diverted safely from the landfill.

Athens developed a “Return to Workplace” plan with three phases to minimize the potential of an outbreak among Athens employees. Athens is currently in phase two, “Contained Transmission & Minimal Restrictions,” with “Monitored Transmission & Long-Term Policy” to follow.

**“With a great deal of planning done early on, Athens Services has been successful in combating outbreaks and contagion of our employees,” said Director of Safety Jaime Britt. “This has allowed Athens to continue to provide exceptional service to our customers without setbacks.”**

## Keeping Recycling Safe

Athens was among the first haulers to put out a statement for customers on how to best handle their waste and protect frontline employees. The EPA has also set up a relevant “how to recycle during COVID” section on its website.

It includes tips such as:

- Make sure cardboard is dry and clean,
- Break down boxes before recycling,
- Make sure to throw away PPE, such as masks and gloves, in the trash,
- Treat recyclables as trash if a household member has COVID,
- Thank your service worker.

These guidelines set by Athens and the EPA are easy to remember and abide by. Following these instructions will help to ensure the safety of our community and frontline workers.

While these are unprecedented and challenging times, Athens is helping folks keep each other safe and meet recycling goals.

By responding swiftly with a thorough plan and training customers on best recycling practices from the start, Athens is again leading the way to a better and safer tomorrow.

For more information, email [communications@athensservices.com](mailto:communications@athensservices.com) or visit [athensservices.com/media/](https://athensservices.com/media/).

*Athens Services is a recycling and waste diversion leader in Southern California. Family-owned and -operated since 1957, Athens was founded on the simple principle of providing exceptional service, by hiring and developing great people, while fostering a safe, healthy, and sustainable environment, that's The Athens Way. Today, Athens Services teams up with local communities, private institutions, and government agencies as their zero waste partner.*