

## Community Waste Prevention



## Regional Refresh Fund: A Year in Review

*Final Report*

*January 2023*

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## BACKGROUND

When the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily shut down many of Metro's operations in the spring of 2020, the impact to the garbage and recycling system was immediate, sending a ripple effect across greater Portland, the fallout of which we are still managing today. An increase in economic insecurity and illegal dumping, paired with reduced staffing levels and the suspension of critical programming, meant impacts to the garbage and recycling system compounded rapidly throughout greater Portland.

In 2020, Metro chose to sunset the Disposal Voucher program due to budget constraints and programmatic issues. The program had provided vouchers to community members that helped cover the cost of disposing waste collected at community cleanup events. An Equity Audit issued in March 2021 also determined the program lacked a decisive equity focus and specific programmatic goals and measures.<sup>1</sup> As Metro began to stabilize its workforce and Metro Council committed critical resources to address the growing trash problem throughout greater Portland, Waste Prevention and Environmental Services Department was tasked with launching a new program that would help clean up the region, equitably address the impacts to the garbage and recycling system and fill the gap created by the discontinuation of the Disposal Voucher program.

In June 2021, the Waste Prevention and Environmental Services Department did a soft rollout of a temporary program that would come to be known as the Regional Refresh Fund (initially called The Clean Neighborhoods Sponsorship Program). A full-time, limited duration Program Coordinator was brought on to build out and expand the program in September 2021, and today the program has funded more than 70 cleanup efforts across the Metro service area removing over 460 tons of waste from the streets and neighborhoods of greater Portland.

This report provides a review of the temporary program including programmatic successes, challenges, and a recommendation to continue the program on a permanent basis.

## PROGRAM OBJECTIVE AND OVERVIEW

The objective of Regional Refresh Fund is to support community-led efforts that promote livability and improve solid waste service equity<sup>2</sup> in the Metro region by providing flexible, low-barrier funding for immediate cleanup needs in underserved communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Evans, Brian, Angela Owens, and Elliot Shuford. Rep. *Solid Waste Service Equity: Establish clear goals and measures at the program level to improve outcomes*. Portland, Or: Metro 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. In March 2021, the Office of Metro Auditor published an in-depth Solid Waste Service Equity audit report which defined "solid waste service equity" as access to solid waste services for people living in census tracts with high proportions of people of color, people with lower income, people with limited English proficiency, and tracts with the highest proportion of people living in multifamily housing.

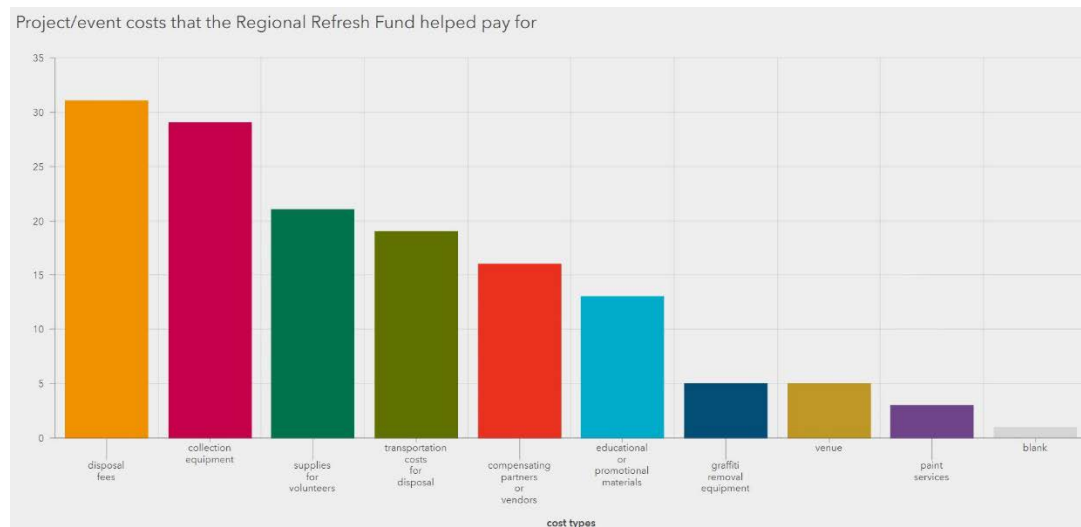
The principles of accessibility and flexibility guided each stage of programmatic development in an effort to create a program that authentically centered equity. Today, the program focuses on accessibility by prioritizing the following:

- A short and simple application process
- Accepting applications on a rolling basis
- Reviewing applications weekly
- Disbursing funds prior to project event dates
- Providing a simple reporting requirement administered through a 10-minute, mostly multiple-choice post-project survey

The program prioritizes flexibility by placing few limits on how recipients may spend funds as long as they directly support the applicant’s approved cleanup effort. Because funding is not restricted just to disposal costs alone, recipients are able to plan more collaborative events that better align with the specific needs of their communities.

As seen in Table 1 below, the most common expense categories recipients put funding toward are disposal equipment and dumping fees, but of course those are not the only expenses typically involved in the coordination of a community cleanup effort. Many recipients use funds to support community partner participation, to purchase cleanup supplies, to print and distribute materials communicating event details and more.

**Table 1 – Project costs**

















Another important resource that shaped the development of the Regional Refresh Fund is the Solid Waste Service Equity audit report issued by the Office of Metro Auditor in March 2021. This in-depth audit report sought to determine the impact of the department’s 2018 Diversity Equity and Inclusion work plan on its solid waste programs. One of the four programs reviewed at length in this audit is the former Disposal Voucher Program. One of the most significant takeaways of the audit is that the best practices put in place at the department level were not necessarily trickling down to the program level. Several

programs lacked specific goals and measures for service equity, data-driven decision-making, and/or policies and procedures that prioritized equity outcomes. This was especially true for the Disposal Voucher Program which was demand-based and executed in partnership with other jurisdictions, limiting its ability to ensure a meaningful focus on equity.<sup>3</sup> Table 2 below illustrates that the Disposal Voucher Program was lacking all three areas of best practice outlined by the auditors indicating a lack of control factors for equity outcomes.

**Table 2 – Program findings of the Solid Waste Service Equity Audit**

**Improvements were needed across the programs we reviewed**

Program	Service equity goals and measures	Data-driven decision making	Policies and procedures
Regional Illegal Dumping Patrol			
Community Enhancement Grants			
Disposal Voucher			
Household Hazardous Waste Mobile Collection Events			

 Partially in place       Not in place

*Source: Auditor Office analysis of program documents, interviews, and data*

Regional Refresh Fund was always intended to fill the gap created by the discontinuation of the Disposal Voucher Program, so it was important the concerns outlined in the audit report were addressed in the development of the new program. The following sections outline the process used to establish clear goals and procedures that prioritize equity outcomes in the overarching goal of cleaning up greater Portland, and describes the means used for collecting programmatic data so appropriate changes can be made as needs arise.

<sup>3</sup> Evans, Brian, Angela Owens, and Elliot Shuford. Rep. *Solid Waste Service Equity: Establish clear goals and measures at the program level to improve outcomes*. Portland, Or: Metro 2021.

## Desired Outcomes and Measurement

Regional Refresh Fund invites nonprofit organizations, public agencies, schools and business district associations to apply for up to \$5,000<sup>4</sup> for cleanup efforts that take place in an Equity Focus Area (as defined by this [EFA lookup map](#)),<sup>5</sup> an environmentally sensitive area, or that benefit another underserved group.

Regional Refresh Fund set out to achieve the following outcomes:

1. Enhance community relationships
  - a. Establish Relationships with new community partners
  - b. Strengthen existing relationships with trusted partners
  - c. Reduce funding barriers for community partners
2. Improve solid waste service equity in the region
  - a. Prioritize funding to communities underserved by the solid waste system in alignment with Regional Waste Plan and DEI goals
  - b. Reduce/remove barriers to proper disposal
3. Improve livability for vulnerable populations
  - a. Incentivize community-led cleanup efforts in the region<sup>6</sup>
  - b. Increase access to safe, proper waste disposal means for the region's unsheltered citizens, those living in low-income multifamily housing, and communities most impacted by the uptick in litter and illegal dumping since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic

A post-project survey was developed for recipients to submit upon the completion of their funded projects. The survey asks simple, quantitative, and qualitative questions related to the above outcomes to help measure impact and success of the programming. It also doubles as an accountability measure since recipients cannot reapply for additional funding through Regional Refresh Fund until they have completed the survey for their previous project. A year of using this reporting method has shown that while most recipients need reminding to complete the survey, they do complete it without issue.

## OUTCOMES

### Goal 1 Successes

The first desired outcome this program wanted to see was enhanced relationships between Metro and community partners, including the cultivation of new partnerships and strengthening of existing ones. Because this program is low barrier by design, we

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<sup>4</sup> The per-project funding limit is \$5,000, however eligible applicants may reapply for additional funding, up to \$20,000 in a fiscal year upon the completion of their previous project and submission of the post-project survey.

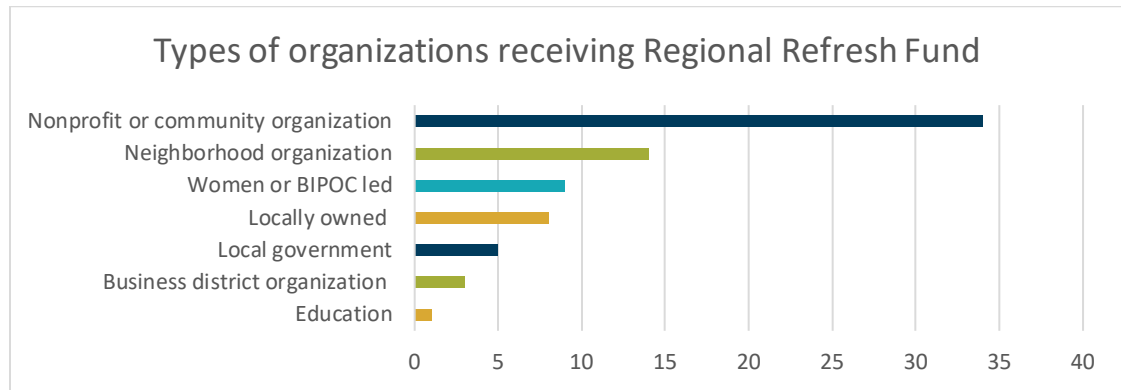
<sup>5</sup> This EFA lookup tool was developed in partnership with Metro's GIS team specifically for this program to make determining eligibility as simple as possible.

<sup>6</sup> In retrospect, we recognize this sub bullet ought to be its own goal since this is the primary focus of this program. This will be addressed in the next year's program objectives with more specific metrics.



believe it to be a positive initial touchpoint with Metro for community organizations who may not have had a chance to work with us before. Of the 73 projects funded by Regional Refresh Fund, 44% were engaging with Metro for the first time. The flexibility of the fund also meant a broader range of organizations were able to participate. Of reporting recipients, 20% were BIPOC or women led, and 32% were neighborhood organizations.

**Table 3 – Types of organizations receiving Regional Refresh Funds**



As of Oct. 28, 2022, 47 recipients have completed their projects and submitted their post-project surveys reporting on the impact of their efforts. Of those who reported a previous working relationship with Metro, 100% stated that their overall opinion of Metro was “favorable” or “very favorable”<sup>7</sup> and indicated their opinion of Metro had improved as a result of this engagement. Of those recipients who had never worked with Metro before, 100% answered their overall opinion of Metro after having their project funded by Regional Refresh Fund was “very favorable”.

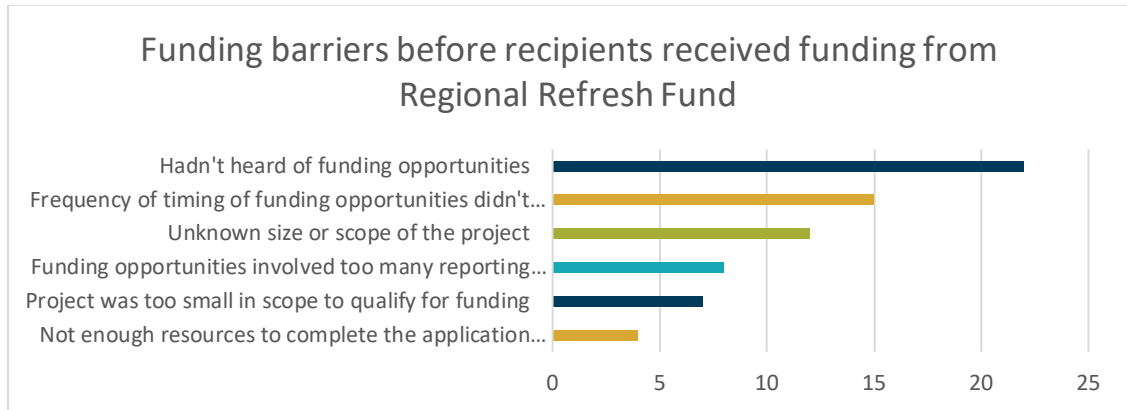
Additionally, 98% of reporting recipients said they are likely or very likely to reapply for sponsorship funding through Regional Refresh Fund in the future.<sup>8</sup>

When asked about the biggest challenges recipients typically face when planning and coordinating a cleanup effort, 77% of respondents listed “Acquiring funding or financial support.” And when it comes to specific barriers in obtaining financial support, respondents identified that their efforts usually do not qualify for funding programs because strict application deadlines, minimum funding limits, and rigorous reporting requirements made applying too prohibitive for small organizations. This tells us that Regional Refresh Fund is helping meet a specific existing need in the community and is one of the primary reasons we are recommending continuation of the program.

<sup>7</sup> The scale provided to respondents is a Likert scale from 1 to 7 with 1= Very unfavorable and 7 = Very favorable. All respondents in this category marked 7 except one who marked 5, indicating a favorable opinion.

<sup>8</sup> One organization stated they were very unlikely to reapply because they had established a consistent funding stream through the City or Portland for future disposal expenses. But when that funding stream was delayed a few months later, they reapplied to Regional Refresh Fund to fill the gap.

**Table 4 – Funding barriers before recipients received funding from Regional Refresh Fund**



Here are what a few organizations had to say about their experience receiving funding through Regional Refresh Fund:

- “We’ve never gone out for funding for something like this. You made getting funding for these projects super easy.” – City of Gresham
- “[This was] the easiest application and award process we have seen in 10 years. Thank you for making this so accessible and fast... We give this program 5-stars!” – Portland Street Art Alliance
- “Before Refresh, there was a limited amount of quick, accessible funding for specific events related to trash. There is also limited opportunities for programmatic level funding to expand trash programs.” – Columbia Slough Watershed Council

Comments like these in addition to the high marks the program is receiving in the post-project survey demonstrate that our efforts to provide accessible funding in a way that centers equity and fosters good-will in the community have been successful. Regional Refresh Fund is a small but effective tool helping Metro advance its equity goals through investment in community organizations providing critical services to underserved communities while cleaning up the streets of greater Portland at the same time.

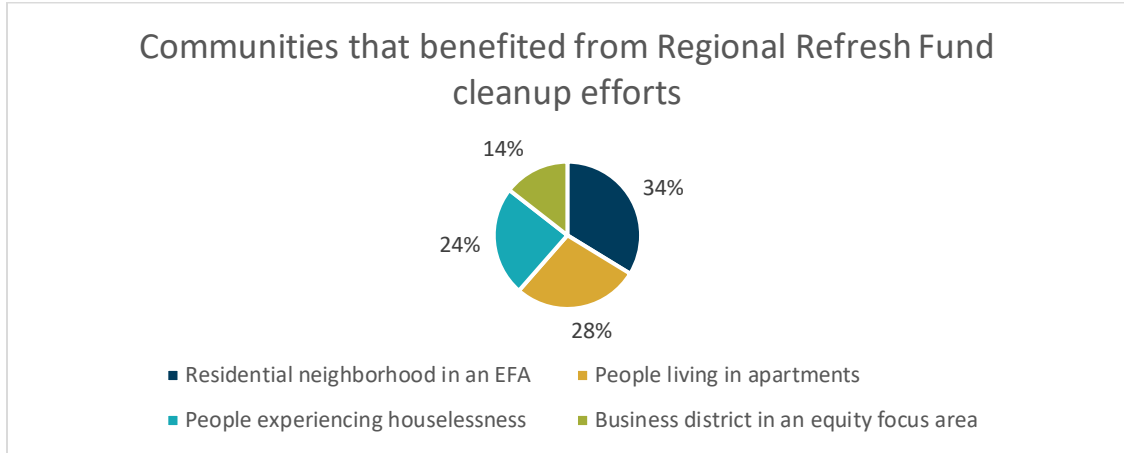
### **Goal 2 Successes**

The second desired outcome for Regional Refresh Fund was to improve solid waste service equity in the Metro region. The Solid Waste Service Equity audit defines solid waste service equity as “access to solid waste services... for people living in census tracts with high proportions of people of color, people with lower income, people with limited English proficiency, and tracts with the highest proportion of people living in multifamily housing.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Evans, Brian, Angela Owens, and Elliot Shuford. Rep. *Solid Waste Service Equity: Establish clear goals and measures at the program level to improve outcomes*. Portland, Or: Metro 2021.

Regional Refresh Fund used this definition to determine its target audiences. 94% of all completed projects took place in a designated equity focus area<sup>10</sup> or provided services to another underserved community such as people living outside or in low-income, multifamily housing units. The remaining 6% focused their efforts on environmentally sensitive areas alone, like rivers and creeks as established by the program criteria.

**Table 5 – Communities that benefited from Regional Refresh Fund cleanup efforts**

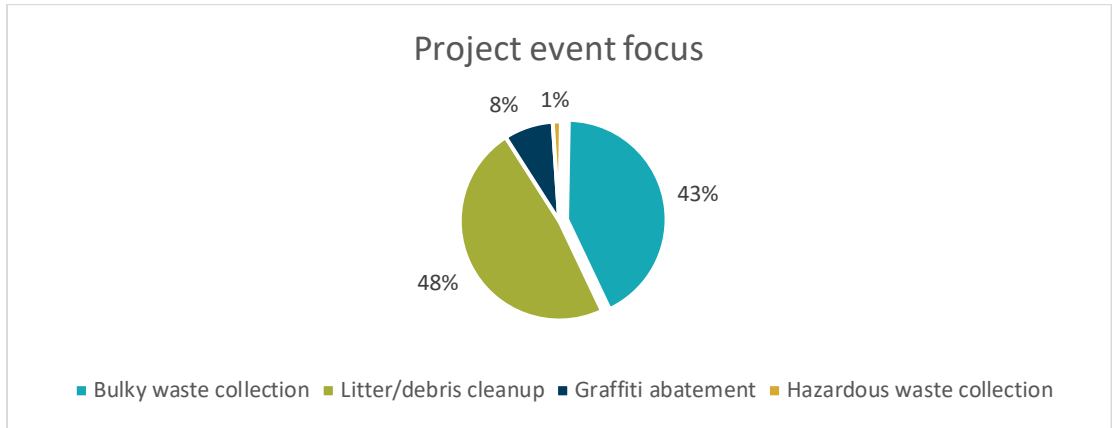


By prioritizing funding to communities underserved by the solid waste system, Regional Refresh Fund has helped reduce existing barriers to proper waste disposal for those communities. For example, this program has seen high demand for bulky waste collection event funding. Approximately 43% of applications funded by Regional Refresh Fund are for projects predominantly focused on a bulky waste collection. Lack of bulky waste collection services during the COVID-19 pandemic has, in many cases, contributed to unsafe living conditions, and an increase in illegal dumping across greater Portland. Many Community Development Corporations and Neighborhood Associations have been especially eager to organize bulky waste collection events for their underserved communities overwhelmed with inadequate or inaccessible means for disposal.

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<sup>10</sup> For this project, *equity focus area* is defined by people living in census tracts with high proportions of people of color, people with lower income and people with limited English proficiency. A searchable map was built and launched with the program to help interested parties determine if their projects qualify. It is important to note that this tool is limited in its ability to determine whether a proposal in fact centers underserved communities, and therefore is simply used as a guide in the review process and does not alone determine eligibility.

**Table 3 – Percentage of each kind of funded project**



Here are two examples of very successful bulky waste collection events, and their direct impacts on the communities they served.

**Figure 1 – Volunteers in the Jade District help organize bulky waste and load it into a dumpster at this APANO organized collection event**



*From the overwhelming number of people who showed up to dump their large items, we could tell there is a real need for more of these events and that people were hanging on to these items for a long time because they either didn't know what else to do or couldn't afford*

*to take them to a dump themselves. We were able to take items that may have ended up on the streets in neighborhoods. We also cleaned up around 18 square blocks in the Jade District, picking up at least 10 full bags of trash from the streets. We even had houseless neighbors join and helped clean up their area which helps the overall sanitation of the neighborhood. These connections are also important for community safety and everyone who lives in the area, housed and unhoused.*

-Alisa Kajikawa, Community Development Manager, APANO

**Figure 2 – An overwhelmed compactor site at Campbell Park Apartments in Gresham before their litter cleanup and bulky waste collection event**



*Most conversations with residents at this location always go towards trash issues. The compactor area is a mess, many residents have to walk a third of a mile to get rid of trash and recycling. Illegal dumping is rampant. Tenants have no options for large item removal and the PM is not helpful, etc.*

*The City's event helped kick start a new chapter of waste management and collaboration between the Property Management company and the tenants. The PM company is encouraged to continue these events bi-annually and they will be increasing the number of locations residents can take garbage. Residents now feel like the City is paying attention to the issues at hand and the PM has an invested [sic] interest in the future outcomes of the site. Efforts are being made to maintain a cleaner property and enclosure area.*

*Many residents were also able to get help removing unwanted items from their apartments. Something the property does not help with and something tenants are scared to ask about.*

*The maintenance staff on site is now more empowered to reach out to the City for help with issues and get more conversations going between the City and the PM company.*

-Nick Isbister, Sustainability Advisor, City of Gresham

### **Goal 3 successes**

Finally, Regional Refresh Fund set out to improve livability for vulnerable populations living within the Metro region. Livability is a vague term but can be defined as the sum of factors that add up to a community's quality of life.<sup>11</sup> This program seeks to attend to this concept by providing opportunities for dignity and agency for residents often excluded from the solid waste system. Specifically, we sought to incentivize more organizations working with vulnerable populations to champion cleanup efforts that would help increase access to safe and proper disposal means for the communities they serve.

In the last year we have seen several organizations do exactly that. Small, community-based organizations led cleanup efforts for the first time because funding was available. For example, in the summer of 2022, Tylia Johnson of Helping Hands PNW applied for funding to leverage her existing volunteer base to organize a series of cleanup efforts in East Portland, an expansion of services not provided before. Her organization has now completed two Regional Refresh Fund-funded cleanup efforts in E. Portland (see Figure 3 below).

In some cases, these funds have acted as critical seed money for some small groups seeking to launch organizations dedicated to helping cleanup the city. Perhaps the most noteworthy example being Jenn Louis' efforts in December 2021. Jenn, an ambitious community member deeply invested in the houseless community applied for funding through Regional Refresh Fund with a fiscal sponsor asking for funding to organize cleanup events that would pay unsheltered individuals \$20/hour to complete the cleanups. That \$5,000 funded the collection and disposal of 8 tons of trash from the streets of Portland and launched the Common Good Project. Metro recently allocated The Common Good Project \$75,000 of state funding from HB 5202 through a special procurement with Trash for Peace to increase programming efforts in Portland, and it all started with one small \$5,000 Regional Refresh Fund investment (see Figure 4 below).

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<sup>11</sup> Administrator. "What is Livability?" Partners for Livable Communities. Accessed November 10, 2022. <http://livable.nonprofitsoapbox.com/about-us/what-is-livability#:~:text=Livability%20is%20the%20sum%20of,cultural%2C%20entertainment%20and%20recreation%20possibilities>.

**Figure 3 – Student volunteers with Helping Hands PNW pause from picking up litter to smile for a photo**



**Figure 4 – Paid day laborers with the Common Good Project pose for a photo with an impressive pile of trash they collected in NE Portland**



Because it is difficult to measure livability in quantitative terms, we set out to measure impact primarily through storytelling. We asked recipients how their cleanup efforts helped improve livability for the communities served by their project. What follows are some responses we received from organizations that received funding. We believe their reported successes speak for themselves.



**Figure 5 – Forest Grove Foundation cleanup of homeless encampment in partnership with campers**



*Through camper initiative and inspiration, this project brought clean-up efforts to a homeless encampment that has been historically under-resourced.*

*9.1 tons of unneeded material was removed by campers, community partners, and Forest Grove Foundation staff that dramatically improved campsite cleanliness of all members of the encampment.*

– Shawn Cardwell, Executive Director of Forest Grove Foundation

**Figure 6 – Woodland Neighborhood Association litter cleanup and bulky waste collection event**



*It took about 40 volunteers and other partners working together to help about 200 households dispose of trash, recycle just about everything that can be recycled in our area, and reuse a lot of great stuff during our Woodlawn Cleanup + Recycling Celebration on June 5, 2022. Everyone who attended also learned about safe disposal of hazardous waste... Metro's \$5,000 Regional Refresh grant covered all of our expenses with local businesses, such as the BIPOC-owned businesses Paper Chase Shredding and Recycling and Able Arm Recycling. We are a much more beautiful community (inside and out) because of this event, as well as the litter/bulking item pickup we did around the entire neighborhood the day before in partnership with SOLVE. This engaged 36 more volunteers, including 6 children.*

*– Rick Reynolds, Chair, Woodlawn Neighborhood Association*

**Figure 7 – North by Northeast community collection day**



*I believe it improved the lives of many. We had the pick-up service which allowed seniors in the neighborhood to get rid of items that would have otherwise been in their way, causing a healthy [sic] hazard ex. tripping, liability with an old refrigerator on their porch. Folks having old medications around the house. 80 ponds [sic] of medications is a lot. Having a place in the neighborhood that was supported by their doctors office a place that they could trust and seeing staff there working made them feel safe and welcomed and excepted [sic] in their own neighborhood to safe [sic] take advantage of a neighborhood type clean up... Getting rid of mattresses that have mold and mildew on them, that have been in the house of some of the people because they do not know where to properly dispose of the mattresses and have been inhaling all of them toxic materials in the air.*

-Sharetta Butcher, Community Care Director, NxNE

**Figure 8 – ROSE CDC bulky waste collection events**



*The collection events were useful to bring to the apartment communities that often struggle with hauling fees and the removal of the items from their apartments. By utilizing volunteers, we were able to help residents remove old furniture and other waste from their apartments and clear space. One resident stated that they had issues with hoarding and having the event be close to their house helped them clear out their apartment and made them feel accomplished.*

-Jami LeBaron, Community Development Manager, ROSE CDC

In summary, these funds have helped improve the quality of life for hundreds of residents in the greater Portland area while helping properly dispose of more than 460 tons of trash.

### **Program Challenges**

1. Because so many organizations are dependent on receiving outside funding for projects before they can commit to planning them, it is not uncommon for projects to be delayed from their originally proposed application date for a variety of logistical reasons that arise in the planning stage. All program recipients have been good at keeping us updated on project status, but it is worth noting that this can be a challenge.
2. In February of 2021, Regional Refresh Fund launched all its materials in Spanish, however due to the lack of Spanish proficient staff that have availability to assist with communication efforts, our ability to scale our outreach efforts to Spanish-speaking

communities has been restricted. Given that this program seeks to prioritize its reach to underserved communities, this is a regrettable limitation.

3. Gathering data on tonnage of waste removed from projects funded by Regional Refresh Fund is an imprecise effort. While larger scale collection events can acquire tonnage amounts from their hauler, several events also offer various other forms of recycling such as scrap metal collection, disposal of thousands of expired prescription medications, mattresses sent to a recycler, etc. Not all this weight is easily weighed and accounted for by the project coordinator. While the program does its best to acquire tonnage from events, we recognize 460 tons is a conservative estimate.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Regional Refresh Fund was established as a pilot project to support community clean-up efforts. Funding for the program was further expanded with the assistance of state-clean up funding through House Bill 5202. The program has demonstrated a successful response to the service equity audit, met its desired outcomes and helped clean up Portland while centering our most underserved communities.

Specifically, the program has demonstrated that a flexible funding model meets the greatest needs of those underserved by our current system. The outpouring of community support has also strengthened Metro's relationships in the community. The program was named as an award recipient at the 2022 Association of Oregon Recyclers' annual conference.

Based on the community response and findings from the annual evaluation, staff recommends:

**1) The Regional Refresh Fund is established as a long-term program for Metro.**

This includes establishing a permanent staff position to manage program demonstration and continued allocation of sponsorship funding.

**2) The program funding is increased from \$211,000 to \$300,000 in FY 23-24 budget.**

Additional program funding will maintain the level of support provided in the last year that included the one-time state funding.

**3) Long term programming should also consider waste prevention efforts including reuse and repair.**

Future program efforts should also evaluate the potential for funding waste prevention activities such as reuse and repair events and efforts that help stop the problems our region faces before they start.