

ZERO WASTE EVENTS GUIDE

Whether this is your first Zero Waste Event, or one of many, this guide provides key steps and useful tips to ensure the event runs smoothly!



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THE BASICS: WHAT IS A ZERO WASTE EVENT?

Zero Waste Events can come in all shapes and sizes, but are united by a common goal: *to minimize the amount of waste produced by of event!*

At the least, this typically requires providing waste streams for all types of materials disposed at the event (i.e. compost, recycling, and landfill/incinerator waste) and support to ensure proper sorting of event waste.

A more extensive Zero Waste Event could also include (but is not limited to):

- Encouraging attendees to bring their own reusable supplies.
- Preventing the use and distribution of any single-use, landfill/incinerator-destined materials.
- Staffing waste stations with volunteers to ensure proper sorting.
- Conducting an audit of all waste streams at the end of the event.
- Setting waste diversion goals for the event, or setting total waste minimization goals (by weight or volume) for the event.
- Collaborating with food recovery organizations to provide leftovers to local food banks or shelters.
- Following the principles of the Waste Hierarchy throughout the event planning process.

Regardless of the extent of your event's zero waste ambitions, this guide will help you think through each step of the process. (If you plan to incorporate a waste audit to measure your event's diversion rate, consider checking out PLAN's *Waste Audit Manual*, available through the PLAN Member Hub.) Keep in mind that after your first Zero Waste Event, you'll have a better sense of waste materials to anticipate, and how you want to prioritize waste reduction in the future.



THE BASICS: WHAT WILL YOU NEED?

Zero Waste Events can take on different forms depending on your priorities and available resources, but here are some basic components you should plan on having:

- **An understanding of your campus's waste system**—prior to the event make sure you can answer to following questions:
 - **Which items are accepted in your campus compost stream?**
If your campus composts, whether or not a given item can be composted will vary based on the type of system or facility the campus uses. Make sure to investigate whether or not your system can handle meat, dairy, and compostable food serviceware (typically PLA bioplastic).
 - **Which items are accepted in your campus recycling stream?**
Keep in mind that recycling systems vary regionally and by facility. In practice, this means an item you can recycle at home, may not be recyclable on your campus (or vice versa). Contact your campus Sustainability or Facilities Office if you're unsure.
 - **Who collects your waste streams, and where?**
If your campus's collection process for food and other organic waste is different from recycling and landfill/incinerator waste, you may need to coordinate a special collection or drop-off.
 - **Which items do you anticipate entering your event's waste streams?**
For example, glass, plastic film, or other potentially hard-to-recycle materials.
- **Waste station(s)**—a three or more bin system with at least one bin for each of the streams that you will be collecting, i.e. one compost bin (if applicable), one recycling bin, and one landfill/incinerator bin. As the event size increases, the number of recycle and compost bins should also increase, but if your event is successfully low-waste, additional landfill/incinerator bins may not be necessary.
- **Signage**—visually communicate to attendees where to take their waste during the event and how to sort correctly. It helps to have pictures or even physical examples of common items that are being used/distributed at the event on your signage.
- **"Trash Talkers"**—volunteers or paid interns who are positioned behind or next to the waste stations to help attendees discard items in the appropriate bin, and troubleshoot any stream contamination.



- **“Zero Waste” Definition**—Take some time ahead of your event to work out a definition of what “zero waste” means in the context of this event. Work through the possible components listed in the *What is a Zero Waste Event?* section on page 4 to determine which features your event will include. Event volunteers, vendors, and attendees will likely ask you what “zero waste” means, and you should be prepared to answer this question!

For additional resources on this topic, consider researching if your school has any Zero Waste Goals of their own, or consulting the Zero Waste International Alliance (ZWIA) definition of zero waste (available at zwia.org/standards/zw-definition/). You can also schedule a call with your PLAN Campus Coordinator for support!



PLANNING & PREPARATION

Moving beyond the basics, this section helps you think through the different steps necessary to plan and prepare logistics of your Zero Waste Event set-up.

Step 1: How large is your event?

The size of your event will determine the number of waste stations, volunteers, and the volume of food needed.

For all events, it is critical to have **at least one waste station**. Typically, the larger the event, the more waste is generated, which may require more stations. The number of waste stations you have will also depend on the location you are using. For example:

- In centralized locations (e.g. a ballroom or theater), one central waste area should be sufficient.
- Open locations, like outdoor events, may require several waste stations dispersed throughout the space. Consider the natural flow of traffic when placing stations.
- If your event is serving food to a large amount of people, or you have multiple food vendors at your events, consider setting up more waste stations.

The more waste stations you have, the more Trash Talkers you will need. We encourage having two volunteers per station. Sorting waste is more fun with a buddy!

Step 2: Where is Your Event Located?

The location of your event will impact with whom you coordinate set-up, clean-up, and supplies. When coordinating space logistics, make sure to do the following:

- Contact the venue manager to inform them you are planning a Zero Waste Event. (Be prepared to explain what this means, since they might not be familiar with the concept!)
 - For large events, try to find a time to think through the flow of the space with them—their venue expertise may help you refine your original estimate of the number of waste stations required, and their spacing.
 - Ask if they can provide any additional resources for managing waste, such as volunteers, bin dollies, sign stands, etc.
- Determine who will be hauling the waste from the event space (e.g. Facilities staff). Make sure you're on the same page regarding where empty bins will be dropped off prior to event, and where full bins will be left after the event.



Note: For larger events, you may have to have your bins emptied multiple times throughout the event. Determine a day-of system for communicating with those hauling waste from the event to ensure this flows smoothly.

Tip: While group coordination poses its challenges, keep in mind that by including different campus stakeholders (e.g. venue managers, dining services) in the planning process, you help normalize a zero waste mindset into campus culture!

Step 3: Will your event have food?

Offering food can be a great way to get people to your event, but it often winds up contributing the largest source of event waste. (This comes not just from wasted food, but also the single-use plates, cups, and utensils food is served with!) By working with your caterer ahead of time and using reusable food serviceware, you can make a huge impact on waste minimization at your event. Follow these steps to minimize waste from serving food:

- Know your composting options—as explained on page 5, make sure you are familiar with the type of composting facilities that exist at your school. If your school composts, can your system process meat, dairy, and compostable food serviceware? If not, can you work with your caterer to provide:
 - Meat and/or dairy-free options?
 - Reusable dishware and dining supplies (plates, cups, utensils, serving platters, and linens)?
- Regardless of whether or not your school composts, make sure to work with your caterer to avoid as much unnecessary food packaging as possible, such as: chip and dessert wrappers, condiment sachets, and plastic-film.
- Encourage attendees to “Bring Your Own Everything” (“BYOE”), including their own utensils, plates, water bottles, mugs, etc. This will help reduce the amount of disposable food serviceware used at the event and build reusables into the campus culture.
- Work with caterers to serve food on reusable food serviceware when possible. This may require budgeting extra funds to rent or purchase items (e.g. plates, utensils).
- When reusable is not an option, go compostable or consider some of the alternatives for single-use items listed on page 49 of PLAN's *Plastic-Free Campus Manual*, which you can find on the [Member Hub](#).

- Encourage attendees to only take what they will eat. After the event, encourage attendees to take remaining food in their to-go containers for future meals!
- Connect with a local soup kitchen, food pantry/bank, or other food donation outlet ahead of time to let them know you may have leftover food. Schedule a pick-up or drop-off location and time, or partner with an existing Food Recovery Chapter on your campus. For more information on Food Recovery programming, check out PLAN's *Food Recovery & Compost Manual* available on the [Member Hub](#).
- For events with multiple meals, set-up "wash stations" for your attendees to wash their personal food serviceware.

How to Set-Up a Wash Station:

Like waste stations, the number of wash stations you provide at your event will depend on the number of attendees. However, each station should consist of the following:

- 4 Tote bins/tubs (one each for: soapy water, clean water, sanitizer, and used towels)
- Tap water
- Liquid dishwashing soap (ideally in bulk)
- Liquid sanitizer (ideally in bulk)
- Laminated bin labels (i.e. waterproof)
- 2-4 Scrub brushes and/or sponges (for the soapy water bin)
- Hand towels for drying

Set-up the totes in a space that creates enough room for one line on either side of the station (this will help prevent crowding). Drying towels will get soggy pretty quickly, so have a wet towel bin nearby the station for depositing used towels, as well as a pile of fresh dry towels for restocking. **Place your tote of soapy water first, your clean water tote second, the sanitizer third, and the dry towels and used towel bin last.** Put up clear explanatory signage by the station to call attention to it, and guide attendees step-by-step through the process.





Zero Waste Food Tips

- ★ While some caterers will try to avoid running out of food by cooking extra and keeping it on hand as back-up, you should aim to use up all the food provided. Work with your caterer to prevent excess food by discussing appropriate quantities with them ahead of time. Additionally, keep track of the amount of food leftover after the event, and if necessary, consider ordering that percentage less for your next event.
- ★ Serving your own food? Buy items like condiments, milk, yogurts, etc. in bulk! Campus dining may be able to help you procure these items if you reach out to them far enough ahead of time.
- ★ When packaging to-go meals for field trips, use recyclable materials like aluminum foil on sandwiches or put each meal in a brown compostable bag without individual wrapping.
- ★ Request RSVPs from attendees to plan for the right amount of food and to avoid leftovers. (This is also a chance to find out if anyone has dietary restrictions or allergies to be aware of!)
- ★ Outside food will most likely enter your event, but don't panic! By educating attendees ahead of time about your zero waste efforts, you can prevent outside food packaging from contaminating your compost or recycling streams. Make sure your landfill/incinerator signage includes disposable items attendees might bring, and **do not shame attendees** for their packaging waste! (It is not the fault of consumers that most products are distributed in wasteful disposable packaging.)
- ★ Does your event provide a giveaway item? If so, when selecting your giveaway consider distributing reusable food serviceware that attendees can during and after the event! (See the *Zero Waste Giveaways Tips* on page 11 for more suggestions.)
- ★ Consider providing incentives for attendees who "BYOE." For example, if vendors are selling food, ask if they can offer a discount for attendees that "BYOE."





Step 4: Who is your audience/attendees?

Items that are handed out by guest vendors and tablers can be another large source of waste. This often includes branded giveaways, snacks, and any packaging associated with them. It is important to identify which materials may be brought to your event by outside sources and to work with these groups ahead of time to prevent unnecessary waste. Consider these ways to engage with your audience:

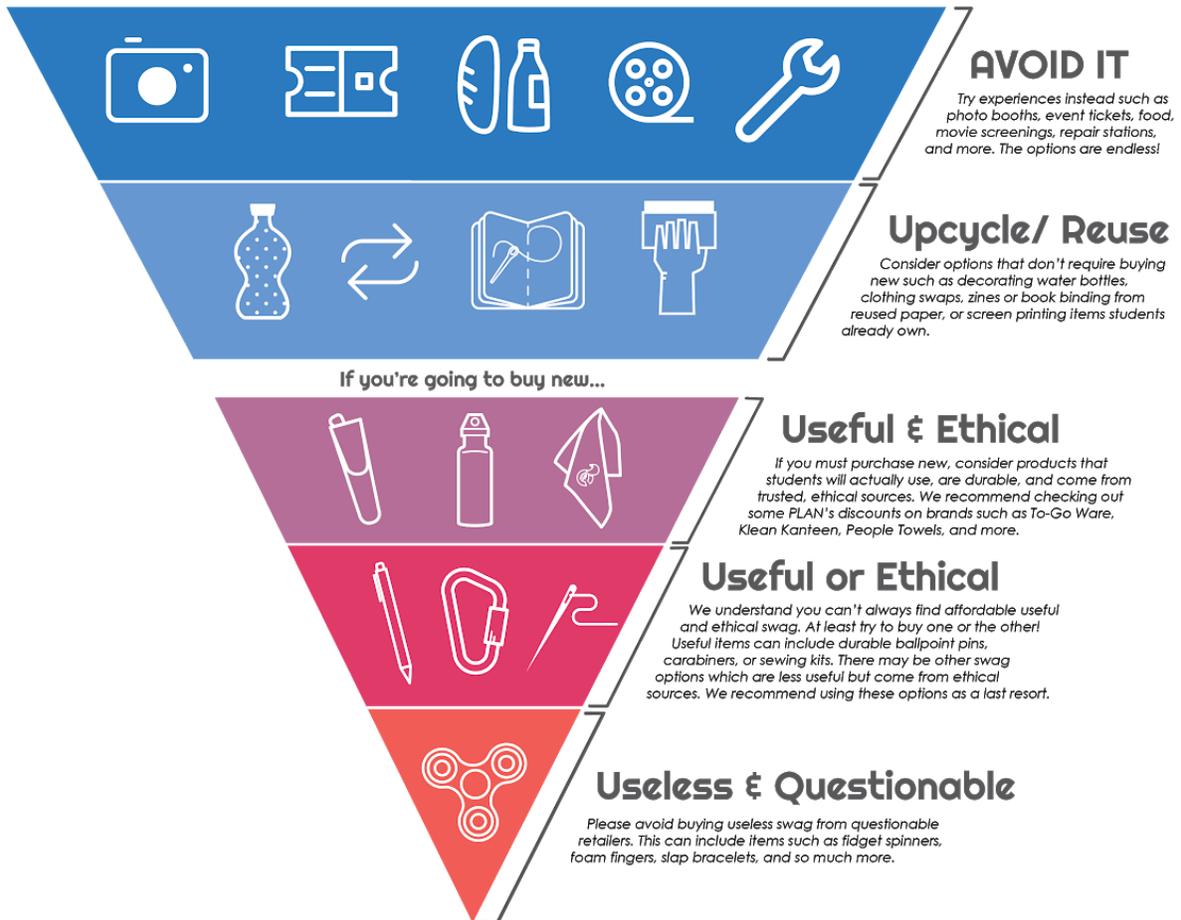
- Provide speakers/presenters, tablers, and/or vendors with zero waste guidelines when preparing for the event (see the *Guidelines for Presenters, Tablers, and Vendors* on page 21).
- If you are providing paper copies of your presentation for accessibility reasons, encourage attendees to save or recycle the hand-outs afterwards.

Zero Waste Giveaways Tips

- ★ Use PLAN's *Swag Hierarchy* to incorporate zero waste principles into to event giveaways (a.k.a. "swag"). As in the Waste Hierarchy, avoiding material freebies is the most desirable approach. However, if you are going to offer giveaways at your event, prioritize reused or upcycled materials; and if you are buying new, prioritize ethically and sustainably made items that attendees will find useful (especially ones that help reduce waste)!
- ★ If you are ordering event giveaways, contact the companies you are purchasing from to see if there are ways to minimize packaging on the shipment. This will help reduce the amount of waste coming into your event!
- ★ Remember—PLAN Members can utilize [discounts](#) on reusable items from our partners. You can access these discount codes on the PLAN [Member Hub](#).



A HIERARCHICAL ETHICAL GUIDE TO SWAG



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Step 5: Is everyone on the same page? (The Final Check-In)

Assemble key players in the planning process at least once before the event. Use this meeting to ensure everybody is on the same page about day-of logistics, specifically regarding food and waste. This includes:

- Venue managers
- Food providers
- Facilities and/or other waste handlers (of compost, recycling, and landfill/incinerator waste)
- Representative from the community group or student organization accepting leftover food
- The student/staff leads of the event

If you are unable to find a meeting time that works for everyone, make sure to speak one-on-one with anyone who can't attend. Use this check-in to run through day-of logistics ahead of time.

Once you work through these five preparation steps, your Zero Waste Event will be off to a great start. Still, you'll need support from all guests to make your event as zero waste as possible. The next section explores how to effectively communicate your zero waste strategies to event attendees, and include them in the process!

MARKETING & COMMUNICATION

To have a successful Zero Waste Event, participants must play an active role in the process. Clearly communicate your zero waste goals ahead of time, and day-of, to ensure attendees understand what you are trying to accomplish and how. Here are some strategies:

- Explain the concept of “BYOE” on your marketing materials, and provide attendees with a list of recommended items to bring; encourage attendees to avoid bringing packaged food into your event.
- Make the marketing itself zero waste:
 - If your event space has television screens, create electronic versions of posters to display on the screens.
 - Utilize social media to advertise your event and gather RSVPs.
 - Create event signage on recovered and reusable materials such as cardboard or old vinyl banners.
 - Save leftover signage for future Zero Waste Events when possible, and properly dispose unwanted signage. (Note: Painted cardboard is typically neither recyclable nor compostable, so try to recover and reuse cardboard signs, if possible!)

Zero Waste Communication Tips

- ★ Harness the visual power of social media to inform your attendees about your zero waste goals before, during, and after the event. Focusing on waste can make for great imagery, especially when utilizing image-based social media platforms!
- ★ Cover landfill/incinerator containers with a removable lid. This reinforces the goal of diverting waste from the landfill/incinerator, and reminds attendees to *think before they throw!*



Removable landfill waste bin cover from the University of Wyoming's Shepard Symposium on Social Justice.
 Photo courtesy of Meghann Cranford.



TRAINING "TRASH TALKER" VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers, or paid student interns, are key in helping your event run smoothly. Their role as Trash Talkers is to troubleshoot bin contamination and educate attendees about zero waste. It is important to make sure that these volunteers feel comfortable with their responsibilities. Follow the steps below to make sure they're properly prepared and equipped for their role as Trash Talkers.

- Be explicit about Trash Talking responsibilities when recruiting; make sure volunteers are comfortable:
 - Talking to strangers.
 - Handling waste (including occasionally fishing into bins to weed out contamination). Provide gloves to ensure that volunteers feel comfortable handling and sorting waste. (Bonus points if they are reusable rubber gloves or gardening gloves!)
 - Staying in one place for a long period of time, possibly standing. (If necessary, you and a volunteer can arrange to have a chair at their bin station during their shift.)

- Hold a volunteer orientation ahead of time to:
 - Educate volunteers on proper sorting protocols. Although you may be a waste champion on your campus, your volunteers may be unfamiliar with the guidelines. Use interactive exercises to help volunteers hone their craft, like a waste relay or zero waste trivia game.
 - Explain what "zero waste" means in the context of this event.
 - Clearly outline day-of volunteer expectations, including everyone's shift time, lengths, and locations.
 - Encourage volunteers to make this an engaging experience for attendees by providing positive reinforcement when attendees sort waste correctly.

Trash Talking Tips

- ★ Aim for two volunteers per station—one experienced Trash Talker and one newcomer volunteer. Sorting waste is more fun with a buddy!

- ★ Provide volunteers with something to identify them, like a bright t-shirt or vest. This will point attendees towards who to talk to if they have any waste questions or concerns.

- ★ When recruiting student volunteers, try reaching out to sustainability clubs, environmental studies courses, or even your friends!



- ★ Engage groups that may not traditionally be waste focused, such as greek life, athletic clubs, or student government. (Sometimes, athletic departments have budgets to pay students groups to clean-up after athletic events. Connect with your athletics department to see if they can help to compensate and recruit volunteers!)
- ★ Incentivize Trash Talking with food, reusable give-away items, or a monetary stipend if available.



DAY-OF: PREP

Now that you have all the planning and logistics in place, the rest of the event is relatively straightforward. During the volunteer training, recruit at least one volunteer to serve as a lead volunteer with you. The lead volunteers walk around during the event to ensure things are running smoothly and answer any volunteer or attendee questions. Prior to your event, walk through the event location with the lead volunteer to ensure that all the waste stations, signs, food, and any additional supplies are in place.

Additionally, consider keeping an ongoing list of notes during the event on the effectiveness of bin numbers, bin locations, volunteer numbers, traffic flow, and any unplanned/problematic materials entering the waste streams.

Day-Of Tips

- ★ Keep extra supplies on hand, such as gloves, permanent markers, tape, trash bags, extra signs, etc.
- ★ Make sure each Trash Talker has the lead volunteer's phone number in case an urgent problem arises.



DAY-OF: CLEAN-UP

With the proper planning, clean-up can be a quick and easy process that includes:

- Assessing contamination to gauge success and sorting displaced items when needed. (If you're seeking quantitative data [e.g. diversion rate], this step may include conducting an audit of your event's waste.)
- Donating or composting leftover food.
- Correctly placing waste bins or bags for pick-up.
- Collecting any used towels and reusable dishware for washing.
- Thanking all of the event volunteers and campus staff who helped make it happen.
- Reporting your success! Share your results and pictures on social media, making sure to thank everyone who helped make the event possible.

CONGRATULATIONS! *Let PLAN know how your event went. Any other questions? Ask your campus coordinator!*



INSTITUTIONALIZING ZERO WASTE EVENTS ON CAMPUS

After hosting a Zero Waste Event, you'll probably want them to become the norm on campus! By institutionalizing zero waste options into your campus's event programming, you can help your campus move towards zero waste and expand campus awareness of this goal. The process is going to look a little different on each campus, but here are a few starting points:

- **Start a Zero Waste Ambassadors Program**—Create a paid (or otherwise compensated) position for students to serve as Trash Talkers at campus Zero Waste Events. This could also include providing Zero Waste Event logistic support (as directed throughout this manual.)
- **Create a “Zero Waste Event” Booking Option**—Give students, staff, and faculty members the option to opt into hosting a “Zero Waste Event” when they reserve a space for a campus event. To start this, you'll need to work with Facilities, Dining, Sustainability, whichever office handles room booking, and (if they exist) the aforementioned Zero Waste Ambassadors. What this option entails will depend on your campus facilities and capacity, but could include:
 - Facilities or custodial staff bringing a full waste station to the space ahead of time, and collecting the and processing the waste afterwards.
 - Assignment of a Zero Waste Ambassador to coordinate Trash Talkers and support event zero waste logistics.
 - An informational guide to which items event hosts should or should not procure in order to keep the event zero waste.
 - A list of recommended caterers who offer zero waste dining options.
 - A link to this guide!
- **Host Zero Waste Event Trainings**—Set-up informational meetings and trainings for event managers, venue managers, caterers, etc. on what it means to hold a campus Zero Waste Event. The more that people are aware of and comfortable with Zero Waste Events, the more they'll be hosted in the future!
- **Set an Example**—Challenge yourself, your group, and your department to make all of your events zero waste.

Remember: You can reach out to your Campus Coordinator for support on institutionalizing Zero Waste Events on your campus!



ZERO WASTE EVENT PLANNING CHECKLIST

You have reviewed the guide and are ready to host your very own Zero Waste Event! Utilize this checklist to track your planning progress for each of the steps outlined in this guide. (Keep in mind that depending on the event, some of the steps may not be relevant, or additional steps may be necessary.) Check the boxes when you have:

- An understanding of what belongs in the compost, recycling, or landfill/incinerator waste streams.
- Determined where to take additional waste materials, such as hard to recycle materials (if applicable)
- Confirmed with your waste collector (including composting, if separate) when, where, and by whom materials will be collected after the event.
- Determined the number of waste stations your event will have.
- Contacted the venue manager and have arranged where to set-up waste stations, and any additional support they may provide (e.g. volunteers, sign stands).
- Contacted the caterer or food vendors and arranged:
 - Menu items. (Are you aiming for meat and dairy-free food?)
 - Food serviceware that prioritizes reusable and compostable options.
 - The amount of food (aiming for minimal leftovers).
 - Incentives for attendees to “BYOE” (if applicable).
- Recruited event volunteers and scheduled a date for a training.
- Provided speakers/presenters, tablers, and/or vendors with Zero Waste Guidelines (available on page __).
- Organized a recipient for for leftover food, and arrange pick-up time and location.
- Marketed the event encouraging “BYOE” system.
- Procured necessary supplies to set-up wash stations for reusable dishware (detailed checklist available on page __).
- Created signs for event, including waste station and (if applicable) wash station labels.
- Trained “Trash Talker” Volunteers.
- Prepped extra supplies (gloves, markers, tape, bags, extra signs, extra serving utensils)
- Selected a day-of Lead Volunteer and conducted a walk-through with them.



GUIDELINES FOR PRESENTERS, TABLERS, & VENDORS

Distribute these zero waste recommendations (or requirements) to your event's speakers/presenters, tablers, and vendors, respectively. You may want to modify them based on the specifics of the event, and the recipients' level of familiarity with Zero Waste Events.

Zero Waste Practices for Speakers/Presenters:

- Create an online version of your presentation and send event coordinators a link ahead of time to share with attendees.
- Consider accessibility by providing printed versions of your presentations with speaker notes, if possible. Encourage attendees to keep or recycle the paper afterward.

Zero Waste Practices for Event Tablers:

- In an attempt to minimize waste from giveaways, please only distribute food or items you think students will use, with no packaging. Ask an event organizer if you want help thinking through Zero Waste options!
- Set-up any informational materials in such a way that passersby can take a photo of them, rather than taking a physical handout.
- Reduce the size of any handouts by making them a quarter sheet or smaller.
- Print display materials on post-consumer recycled content or other reused materials.
- Use electronic sign-up forms for collecting emails or giving surveys.

Zero Waste Practices for Vendors:

- Provide any food in reusable or compostable food serviceware.
- Ensure any compostable food serviceware is compatible with school's composting system.
- Provide attendees with incentives for bringing their own reusable items (e.g. discounts).
- Do not provide bags with purchases unless specifically requested by customers. If you do provide bags, please offer paper rather than plastic.
- For the waste that is generated by your station, have the appropriate bin (compost, recycling, etc.) close to your station to accept your materials and make sure it is streamlined with the rest of the event.
- Use electronic sign-up forms for collecting emails or giving surveys.



If you have any questions or concerns, check with the event organizers!

Name(s): [fill in]

Email(s): [fill in]

Phone Number(s): [fill in]