

Safety Matters

YOU'VE HEARD THE REPORTS. SAFETY PROGRAMS can save lives in the waste industry. And as the city of Atlanta sadly learned last month, truck maintenance can too.

In February, a city garbage worker was killed while on his collection route. As the driver tried to turn a corner, the garbage truck's brakes gave out, and the truck ran off the road and crashed into a tree. While the driver survived his injuries, the impact with the tree crushed the truck's passenger compartment. Passenger Maurice Thomas unfortunately did not live after being ejected from the vehicle.

In the past few years, the waste industry has increasingly focused on developing safety programs to improve worker health and to contain health and insurance premiums that have been skyrocketing. The results have been notable.

Houston-based Waste Management Inc. (WM), for example, has reduced injuries by 20 percent each year since 2001 with its "Mission to Zero" campaign. Likewise, in the past four years, Allied Waste Industries, Scottsdale, Ariz., has reduced accidents by 60 percent according to the company's safety director. Nearly 200 local governments have adopted the "Slow Down to Get Around" program developed by Rumpke Consolidated Companies, Cincinnati, and McNeilus Truck Manufacturing, Dodge Center, Minn., to educate consumers about safe practices around service vehicles. And these are just a few instances of sound safety programs across the country.

The combined efforts helped to reduce the waste industry's fatality rate by 30 percent in 2002, compared with the previous year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Washington. Yet as the Atlanta accident points out all too poignantly, there's still much more the industry can do. It's not enough to ingrain safety practices into the minds of workers and customers. Waste companies also need to evaluate their maintenance programs.

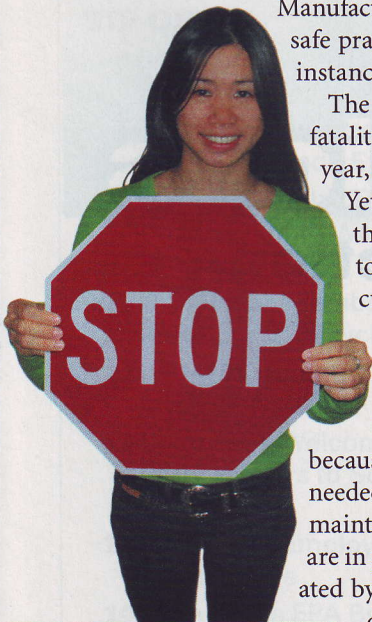
In this month's cover story [which begins on page 28], WM provides a dramatic example of how it reduced costs by \$85 million in one year with its maintenance program because vehicles became more durable and fewer spares were needed. But just as important, the story indicates that routine maintenance can prevent brake failure. Even when brake pads are in good shape, brake "glazing" can occur when heat generated by frequent starts and stops glazes the brakes, making it difficult to stop a vehicle.

In Atlanta, the need to examine preventive maintenance practices should have hit home sooner. Almost one year ago, another city garbage truck crashed into a house when the vehicle's brakes failed and it rolled down a hill. No one was hurt in that accident, but the home's basement was flooded when water pipes shattered.

Indeed, accidents are not always caused by operator or customer error. When it comes to safety, maintenance matters, too.

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