

Clean Water Fund – Waste Management RFI Submission

1. General Information

Organization/Respondent Name*: Clean Water Fund

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2.1 Profile

Clean Water Fund is a nonprofit organization under section 501(c)3 of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code that has been operating since 1974. Our Pennsylvania chapter has 15 full time employees across our Philadelphia and Pittsburgh offices.

Clean Water Fund's mission is to develop strong grassroots environmental leadership and to bring together diverse constituencies to work cooperatively for changes that improve their lives, focused on health, consumer, environmental and community problems.

Clean Water Fund's programs build on and complement those of Clean Water Action, a one-million-member national organization which has helped develop, pass, strengthen and defend the nation's major water and toxics laws such as the Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, Superfund and others, including their state-level counterparts.

Clean Water Fund has worked in Philadelphia for roughly 40 years, partnering with residents, community organizations, small businesses, and local institutions. We use education, technical assistance, and direct community engagement to drive solutions that are locally informed, sustainable, improve water quality, reduce pollution, and protect public health. Our organization played a key role in the successful implementation of Philadelphia's plastic bag policy, which reduces litter and pollution by promoting the reuse of carryout bags.

2.2 Relevant Experience

Our continued core programs include:

- **Zero Waste:** Our ReThink Disposable program prevents trash before it starts by working with local governments, businesses and institutions, and consumers to minimize single use disposable packaging in food service to conserve resources, prevent waste, and reduce litter in our streets and waterways.
- **Lead Hazard Awareness:** Our Lead Hazard Awareness Program (LHAP) is a community-centered outreach campaign with the mission reaching the most impacted communities in Philadelphia to empower its residents to identify and live safely with lead poisoning hazards in their homes and communities.
- **Environmental Justice:** We're part of the William Penn Foundation (WPF) funded Green Stormwater Infrastructure (GSI) Team, who is partnering on the Resilient Community Stormwater Initiative (RCSI) to address flooding and stormwater issues by transforming vacant, blighted properties and impervious surfaces into 26 total acres of greened spaces that'll benefit communities in West, South, Southwest, and North Philadelphia.
- **Ending Illegal Dumping:** To combat illegal dumping in Philadelphia, we've partnered with the Trash Academy to develop the Clean Philadelphia NOW coalition (CPN) whose campaign platform outlines a comprehensive approach through prevention, abatement, enforcement, and education to eliminate litter and dumping by 2028.
- **Air Quality Monitoring:** Our recently funded project, supported by a grant from the US Environmental Protection Agency, focuses on monitoring air pollution in South Philadelphia, specifically in the Grays Ferry and Point Breeze neighborhoods. The project aims to track and document air quality while building local knowledge and advocacy around air and health issues. We are training and hiring community members to help install and manage air monitors, support data collection, and serve as air quality educators and advisors.

3.1.1 (a)

Prioritize Extensive Community Engagement:

We recommend that the City prioritizes extensive community engagement in its waste management planning and implementation. Our experience through the Resilient Communities Stormwater Initiative (RCSI) and the West Philadelphia Community Green Plan has consistently

demonstrated that deep community engagement is critical, not only for effective public education but as a foundational step for identifying innovative, locally driven solutions. Although these projects were not directly focused on waste management, the underlying principle of community-led planning and engagement remains highly relevant. Examples directly related to waste management include Cecil St. Garden managed by Empowered CDC and Ms. Verna's Garden managed by Dianna Coleman, which emerged organically from resident efforts to address illegal dumping and vacant lot blight. Additionally, Empowered CDC has developed a model for community-run dumping sites aimed at reducing pressure on the City for clean ups. The City can replicate and scale such community-driven models citywide to achieve more sustainable and locally supported waste management outcomes. These models can be used to establish baselines for best practices against which to measure other proposed solutions.

3.3.1 (xii)

Expand Collaboration with Trash Academy:

Building upon our existing partnership, we recommend expanding collaboration with Trash Academy through the Clean Philadelphia NOW initiative. Combining Clean Water Fund's proven models for community engagement and participatory planning with Trash Academy's innovative educational toolkits and games creates a robust framework for addressing litter and illegal dumping at the neighborhood level. Expanding this collaboration will enhance resident education, empower local advocacy, and foster community-driven solutions to persistent waste challenges throughout Philadelphia. Trash Academy is exponentially gaining momentum with community organizations across the City, with increasing requests for toolkits and workshops.

3.3.3 General Information on Zero Waste Strategies

ReThink Disposable

ReThink Disposable is a nationally recognized waste reduction program that helps food service businesses eliminate single-use disposable items at the source. By focusing on behavior change and reusable alternatives, this program stops waste at its origin rather than managing it after disposal. ReThink Disposable is a proven upstream waste diversion method designed to **reduce trash before it starts** by eliminating single-use disposable foodware at the source. It originally launched in California in 2011.

How ReThink Disposable Works

ReThink Disposable partners directly with food service businesses and institutions to eliminate single-use disposable items and switch to durable, reusable alternatives. The program provides comprehensive support to ensure successful implementation and lasting impact.

First, we conduct an assessment of the business's current disposable use to identify opportunities for reduction. Then, we provide reusable products tailored to the business's needs, such as reusable cups, containers, utensils, and bags. These products are carefully sourced, purchased by our team with grant funding, and delivered by our team to reduce barriers for the business.

Alongside product provision, we offer hands-on technical assistance, helping businesses redesign their operations to integrate reusable systems efficiently. This includes training staff on new procedures, educating them on environmental and cost benefits, and troubleshooting challenges during the transition.

Local Implementation

Clean Water Fund expanded ReThink Disposable to Philadelphia in 2023. Since then, our pilot has demonstrated significant success. We piloted and scaled this initiative in partnership with community-serving institutions and small businesses, particularly in Environmental Justice communities. In Philadelphia, we successfully worked directly with 20 local food service businesses to help them eliminate over 2 million single-use disposable items annually, diverting 28,000 pounds of trash from nearby landfills and incinerators each year. Participants have saved between \$2,000 and \$23,000 per year while significantly reducing waste generation, increasing the economic stability and sustainability of the local participating businesses. These measurable impacts illustrate that ReThink Disposable is a cost-effective, scalable solution that transforms business practices toward sustainability.

Our work leverages strong partnerships with influential local organizations including the Sustainable Business Network of Greater Philadelphia, Circular Philadelphia, Green Philly, and Echo Systems. These collaborations enable us to reach a wide network of food businesses and institutions, amplifying program adoption and success citywide.

Clean Water Fund believes that with the right funding and support, ReThink Disposable could be a core waste reduction strategy for the City of Philadelphia's ongoing efforts to divert waste and improve environmental health.

Additional Information on Implementation

While our ReThink Disposable pilot in Philadelphia was successful in creating local partnerships, empowering small businesses, and diverting trash from landfills, this was achieved with limited funding and resources dedicated to the project. If fully funded, we could significantly scale the program, expand our support to more restaurants, and engage larger businesses and institutions to create lasting impact.

For example, ReThink Disposable as a fully funded program could transition 40-60 local restaurants from single-use disposable foodware to reusable, long lasting alternatives per year. This would reduce a combined 4-6 million pieces of single use foodware each year and divert 52,000-78,000 pounds of trash annually.

In addition to local restaurants, our ReThink Disposable program has been successful in transitioning schools and emergency food relief institutions to reusable foodware as well.

In Connecticut, our New England Zero Waste Specialist worked with Middletown Public School System to convert the cafeterias in their high school, middle school, and eight elementary schools to reusable foodware. This project is reducing 3,726,000 pieces of single use disposables annually, diverting 31,609 pounds of trash from landfills, and is saving the school district \$91,175 annually (factoring in the \$30,000 increase in labor costs).

We have already started building connections with Philadelphia Schools District's GreenFutures Program, and if funded we would work to assist them in their goal of transitioning to full-service kitchens with reusable foodware. Partnering with GreenFutures to transition more of our cafeterias to reusable foodware would divert tens of thousands of pounds of single-use packaging waste from entering our landfills and nearby incinerators, while saving the school district money, reducing students' exposure to microplastics from single packaging, and foster sustainable habits in our students.

The only support needed to continue this program is funding, and that is why we believe that the City of Philadelphia should include waste reduction, zero waste, and circularity in future RFPs. Should the City of Philadelphia decide to transform this RFI into an RFP, Clean Water Fund stands ready to partner with the City of Philadelphia to broaden the reach of ReThink Disposable and create a cleaner, healthier, and more sustainable city by preventing waste before it begins.