



Solutions to the Waste & Recycling Industry's Growing Driver/Worker Shortage

NATIONAL WASTE & RECYCLING ASSOCIATION



The waste and recycling industry has experienced a growing shortage of employees possessing the required technical skills for driving and operating machinery over the past several years, even before the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated matters. This has been fueled in part by generational demographics as well as by a shift away from career and technical education in secondary schools.

CDL Drivers Are Hard to Find

This shortage has proven to be particularly acute when it comes to hiring individuals with a commercial driver's license (CDL). The private sector waste and recycling industry has a commercial motor vehicle (CMV) fleet of more than 130,000 waste, recycling and compost collection trucks and an even greater number of CDL drivers. Despite this, waste and recycling companies are struggling to find enough CDL drivers.

By 2026, the solid waste collection industry will have 14,200 new jobs for collection drivers and helpers; 1,900 new jobs for diesel service technicians and mechanics; and 300 new jobs for welders, cutters, solderers and brazers. An already tight labor market with more job openings than potential qualified employees will only worsen an already difficult situation as demand for these positions grows.

Education & Apprenticeships are Integral Solutions

Career and technical education, such as that provided under the Perkins Act, helps address the problem by increasing the pool of individuals possessing the right skill sets.

More can be done, however, such as allowing Pell Grants and state/local educational assistance to be used at trade and vocational schools as well as increasing the flexibility of these education grants by authorizing nontraditional schools that are approved for GI benefits to be eligible under the grants' provisions for receiving aid. Expanding the educational options available to students can help alleviate the workforce shortage in areas where skills are in demand.

Apprenticeships in programs established under the U.S. Department of Labor, such as the one developed for employers in the waste and recycling industry between the National Waste & Recycling Association and FASTPORT, also are an integral part of the solution by building on core competencies as apprentices become proficient in each of the necessary areas to obtain a CDL and safely operate a CMV. Employers receive a copy of the standards and request certification to train apprentices under the provisions of these standards.



On-the-job apprentices are assured qualified training personnel and adequate supervision during their apprenticeships. Their training follows the approved “Work Process Schedule and Related Instruction Outline” including the rotation of tasks to ensure they are proficient in the competencies.

Military Skills to Civilian Careers

Additionally, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) has implemented provisions of the FAST Act to assist in the transition of military veterans into careers as CMV drivers.

These include a rule extending the time for military personnel to apply for a skills test waiver, permitting active-duty military personnel to apply and be tested for their commercial learner’s permits and CDL in the state where they are stationed and allowing veteran operators to obtain their Department of Transportation medical certification exams from their Department of Veterans Affairs physician.

The CMV Operator Safety Training Grant Program provides grant funds to commercial driver training schools that train veterans to transition into civilian motor carrier careers.

The Biden Administration's Trucking Action Plan

The Biden administration's Trucking Action Plan supports new registered apprenticeship programs to increase the supply of truck drivers by creating new pathways into the profession, cutting red tape to expand high-quality training and laying the foundation for improving job quality to keep people in the profession. Likewise, states must be supportive of such apprenticeship programs at the state level.

Finally, FMCSA’s pilot program enabling 18- to 20-year-old drivers who hold a CDL to drive from one state to another also helps expand the pool of drivers available not just to the waste and recycling industry but for all industries that rely upon truck transportation. These individuals can drive several hours within their home state, but under antiquated rules cannot drive across a state line that may only be a few minutes from their point of origin.

Drivers, mechanics, welders and others in the waste and recycling industry all play important roles in ensuring that the work of maintaining the nation’s public health through proper sanitation can be performed reliably on a regularly scheduled basis. An all-of-the-above approach that incorporates private sector, local, state and federal efforts to expand the number of skilled employees is the only way to meet the increasing demand.