

## Alameda County program urges environmentally-friendly garbage

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Piedmont teacher's aide Carole Lowenberg has nothing to hide.

In fact, it could be said that her life is an open garbage bag.

Lowenberg recently won a \$50 Visa gift card from Alameda County's "Ready Set Recycle" contest for having the highest-integrity trash on her neighborhood's garbage route. She and her family did the best job of all trash randomly sorted in her area by [StopWaste.Org](http://StopWaste.Org), a joint agency made up of the Alameda County Waste Management Authority and the Alameda County Source Reduction and Recycling Board.

"Once you figure out where everything goes, it can't be easier to do," Lowenberg said, referring to garbage, composting and recycling bins sitting outside her Mountain Avenue home.

Lowenberg's home was randomly selected by [StopWaste.Org](http://StopWaste.Org) for a garbage evaluation after the agency placed hand cards on bins to notify residents of the three-month contest and allow them to opt out.

Since the contest launched in April, the county has given 35 awards for having the smallest percentage of recyclable and compostable material in their garbage. Twenty of the winners came from online pledges to participate and 15 from random sorting.

County residents divert 69 percent of trash from the overburdened landfills, but have voted to make the goal 75 percent. By the end of the contest, crews will have sorted garbage from 80,000 homes, and top winners could receive up to \$500 in prizes.

"The purpose is to encourage residents to sort all the time, and this is a way for them to be reminded of what they should do," said Jeff Becerra, a [StopWaste.Org](http://StopWaste.Org) spokesman.

Education about what is recyclable and compostable as opposed to trash is key to reducing garbage, Becerra said.

The agency's website offers tips on what foods -- from bread to coffee grinds and fruit -- are accepted in the food scrap recycling program along with materials like pizza boxes and paper towels. The contest's separate website, [www.readysetrecycle.org/](http://www.readysetrecycle.org/), also offers recycling tips and a quiz to test residents' knowledge of recycling.

Lowenberg said her students at Havens Elementary are particularly conscientious about recycling, often asking which materials can be placed in special bins versus put in the garbage. But it's a lesson she's still teaching her own children, who are 17 and 22.

"They get lazy, then they get reprimanded," she said. "But it's about educating them that it's their world."

After garbage bags selected for evaluation are picked up, they are taken to sorting stations. Members of an iron-stomached contract crew hired by [StopWaste.Org](http://StopWaste.Org) to evaluate the bags wear thick gloves and masks covering their noses and mouths as they rummage through the smelly insides of large bags.

They pull sticky and spoiled food away from toilet tissue and plastic bags, shaking their heads about what could have been placed in recycling or compost bins. Viki Long, a crew supervisor at a waste station in Davis, said she is surprised what crews find.

"I'm disappointed about just how much is wasted," she said. "You can tell when people have cleaned out their refrigerator."

Through the end of June, residents can sign up to be considered for the contest and take the "I Recycle" pledge at [www.ReadySetRecycleContest.Org](http://www.ReadySetRecycleContest.Org). When signing up for the contest, county officials ask that residents include the day of their regular trash pickup

