

WHY CLEAN UP LITTER?

This educational component is designed to provide context around the purpose of doing a litter cleanup and to demonstrate the impact that litter has on our community to volunteers. At the end of your cleanup, follow up with the reflection questions and discussion.

What's so bad about litter?

Ask volunteers to brainstorm a list of reasons cleaning up litter is important. Touch on the topics below if they're not mentioned.

- Litter is **unhealthy for humans**. It provides breeding areas for germs and can cause injuries, like stepping on broken glass. It also pollutes the water, soil, and air that we rely on.
- Litter is **very harmful to wildlife**, causing injury, illness, and even death. Animals get caught in litter, use litter as nesting materials, and even think that it is food and eat it. It also pollutes the water they drink from.
- **Litter is ugly**. Littered areas have an effect on the economy of an area. People don't want to visit or live in areas that are littered.
- Litter eventually **makes its way to storm drains**, which is washed into our lakes and rivers without being treated or filtered. Stormwater pollution is the #1 cause of water pollution in Nebraska.
- Research shows that one of the strongest contributors to littering is the **prevalence of existing litter**. When people see trash, they do not feel it is necessary to find a trash can. The opposite is also true – when a place is clean, people are much more likely to keep an area clean.

What did you learn from your litter cleanup?

Gather your group together to celebrate the impact you had on the space you are cleaning up, and the surrounding community. Lead the group in a conversation with the following questions to wrap up the experience.

- Did you find a lot of litter? What kind of litter did you see most often? What could prevent this litter?
- What surprised you? What was the strangest thing you found?
- Why is it important to pick up litter?
- How else can we take care of the spaces where we live?
- What are some everyday choices that we make that could improve the overall health of our environment?
- What is something you can start doing today to help make a difference in your community?

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How long does litter last?

Guessing Game Instructions:

1. Say the name of the item.
2. Have participants guess how long it takes for that item to decompose. Let several people guess before telling them the correct answer.
3. As you mention the different times it takes to decompose, discuss what else we can do with our waste besides send it to a landfill – compost food waste, recycle, use reusable water bottles, etc.

Note: Decomposition times are sometimes estimated based on research. For example, it isn't known exactly how long it takes an aluminum can to decompose, but based on research, we can estimate. Items can break into smaller pieces without actually decomposing. Decomposition is when an item breaks down into simpler parts.

- **Paper Bag:** 1 month
- **Banana Peel:** 6 weeks
- **Cotton Clothes:** 6 months
- **Cardboard Box:** 2 months
- **Aluminum Can:** 200 years
- **Plastic Bottle:** 450 years
- **Styrofoam Cup:** over 5,000 years
- **Nylon Clothes:** 30 - 40 years
- **Cigarette Butt:** 12 years
- **Plastic Bag:** 500 years
- **Glass Bottle:** Never - it doesn't biodegrade!
- **Apple Core:** 3-4 weeks