

Australian Services Union – National Office
Submission to the
Road Safety Remuneration Tribunal
Third Annual Work Program

The Australian Municipal, Administrative, Clerical and Services Union (ASU) wishes to thank the Road Safety Remuneration Tribunal for the opportunity to participate in the Waste Management Industry Inquiry.

The ASU is one of Australia's largest unions, representing approximately 120,000 members. The Union has a long history of involvement in municipal waste management.

This submission will mainly deal with the collection of residential waste collection as municipal authorities continue to be involved in this activity. But we take this opportunity to note that commercial and industrial waste collection is often in the hands of private operators.

In urban areas in Australia in the nineteenth century, rubbish was dumped indiscriminately and this resulted in the spreading of disease (for example bubonic plague in Sydney). Municipal governments stepped in to provide waste collection services primarily as a means of countering the health hazards from the build-up of rubbish in cities. This was, and continues to be, an essential service provided by the municipal governments. Waste management continues to play an important role in the health and wellbeing of our communities today.¹

Local government is the product of state legislation which includes regular performance reporting requirements and accountability to community members.

Local councils have worked to meet the varied waste management needs of ratepayers and to fulfil obligations under their waste management plans. It has proved to be competent at providing for essential health needs through waste services. Because it has various points of contact with community members, it is also well placed to understand and respond to changing community needs.

In recent times the range of waste collection services available to communities has broadened to include mixed waste and recyclables as well as green waste in some areas. In addition, some councils also provide special collection services which include hard waste collections (such as collection of old furniture) and designated drop-off depots for e-waste and chemical waste.²

Kerbside waste collection can be highly dangerous work which is why councils have a strong focus on safety equipment, safety procedures, practices and training.

¹ For example, the introduction to waste collection and street cleaning services in urban environments are reputed to have had a considerable impact on the decline of disease for example see historical notes, 'Minding the Streets'; on the City of Sydney Council website <http://history.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/sydneystreets/Minding_the_Streets/Street_Cleaning/default.html> accessed 1 April 2015.

² Productivity Commission, Waste Management: Productivity Commission Inquiry Report, No. 38, 20 October 2006, p 68 <http://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0014/21614/waste.pdf> accessed 1 April 2015.

Local laws developed by councils deal with a range of important community safety, peace and order issues. Municipal waste management workers therefore perform their roles and responsibilities within a strong regulatory framework.

Safety considerations also help to determine the number of workers involved in the collection and disposal process as well as the type of technology used. Overtime there have been considerable changes in the technology of plant and equipment used for kerbside waste collection. Significant local government investment in new waste collection trucks and their maintenance has a focus on safety - rather than being driven exclusively by cost imperatives.

Local councils have training programs to help ensure that staff members are aware of their health and safety responsibilities as well as ensuring they provide a high quality service to the diverse communities.

These council workers tend to receive higher rates of pay and conditions of employment than the private companies which operate in the waste management industry. Such higher rates of pay help to attract people who then work for lengthy periods with the local council and develop their skills and safety awareness.

Safety issues for the community are often best handled by long term council waste staff as they are more familiar with local road conditions, difficult local streets, where the pedestrian crossings are, as well as the routes children walk to school - all making our communities safer as well as cleaner places.

However, the ASU is aware that many councils have contracted-out waste management services to private companies in an effort to reduce their costs. It is often the case that such cost reductions are the result of reduced wages and conditions of workers, reduced commitments to safety and training priorities and reduced costs related to purchase and upkeep of vehicles. In effect, savings are often made at the expense of the workers when waste collection services are privatised.

In addition, many of these private companies use casual labour and experience high staff turn-over rates as workers move-on to look for more secure and better paid jobs. This high turnover can also be destabilising for remaining workers and safety training provision is often insufficient to keep pace with the needs of their workforce.

The ASU supports sections of the submission made by the Transport Workers' Union of Australia because of the concerns expressed above. Most notable we support their recommendations in relation to addressing the need for fair remuneration of workers in the waste management industry generally and waste collection in particular. In addition, there needs to be more emphasis placed on safety issues relating to vehicle maintenance and repair concerns.

There needs to be fairer treatment of workers who are moved from local government to private contractors – so as to protect them from reductions in wages, conditions and entitlements.

Safety should also be given a higher priority with regard to training and addressing risks and hazards.

The ASU also agrees with TWU submission, in regards to the need for proper consultation and training in relation to:

- Fatigue management
- Workplace health and safety
- National heavy vehicle requirements
- Safe operating procedures
- Industrial rights training

A broader range of quality public sector services can be provided by councils which retain in-house provision of waste management services. This is the case for several reasons. For example easy contact with councils allows residents to report spillages or other problems which may occur after waste collection has taken place. Those councils can readily respond and send teams to clean up, attend to community complaints or service quality issues.

In addition, council which retain their workers, vehicles and equipment have been able to use them in emergency situations. Council trucks and other vehicles may be needed to assist in times of flood, storm or fire emergencies to help protect communities and property. The locally based nature of these vehicles, along with the local knowledge of well-trained council staff can be critical at such times and be used in a range of tasks such as clearing away fallen trees, debris and torn building materials.

Whilst local councils may have broader commitments to communities in these ways; the safety and adequate remuneration of workers is something which should be given due consideration whether services are provided in the public sector or private sector. We therefore thank the Tribunal for this opportunity to participate in the Inquiry and we look forward to being able to provide more information as part of the public hearing in May 2015.

Please see below details of our contact person should you wish to discuss this submission further.

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