



# Reviewing Recycle Coach

## Observations from the Chicago Recycling Coalition

The Chicago Department of Streets and Sanitation (DSS) Recycling Bureau has launched [Recycle Coach](#) (RC), a tool designed to help residents learn how to recycle correctly and make it easier to navigate Chicago's waste and recycling services. RC was introduced in January 2025. After using the app during its first year, the Chicago Recycling Coalition (CRC) views RC as a promising resource that already provides useful information and engagement opportunities, with significant potential to grow through continued updates and user participation. While CRC recognizes that reducing and reusing materials provides greater environmental benefits, recycling still plays an essential role in managing waste. When done right, recycling reduces the need to use the earth's finite natural materials and lowers emissions that cause climate change.

Recycle Coach provides collection schedules, reminders, and service information for households participating in Chicago's Blue Cart program (i.e., single-family homes and buildings with four or fewer units that receive recycling collection from DSS or its contractor LRS). Residents of larger apartment and condominium buildings typically receive recycling services through private waste haulers and therefore will not find building-specific collection schedules in the app. However, many of the recycling guidelines, material search tools, educational resources, and disposal recommendations remain useful regardless of where a resident lives.

In addition to providing reminders about recycling and collection days, users can test their knowledge through quizzes, explore educational content in the "Discovery Zone" such as "Recycling Fundamentals" and "Misunderstood Materials," and access resources designed specifically for kids. CRC has been pleased to see that the educational content is not static and content has been updated during the first year. RC also maintains a blog that provides timely information throughout the year. At the time of our review, recent articles included a timely seasonal review "What to Do With Used Fireworks" and "5 Eco-Friendly Summer Activities".

By combining practical recycling guidance with timely seasonal content, RC has the potential to keep residents engaged. This is particularly important because recycling education works best when it is relevant to people's daily lives. This ability to connect recycling decisions to everyday activities is an important feature of RC, and offers the potential to make the platform an even more useful tool.

One of the most interesting and convenient features of Recycle Coach is its ability to identify items through user photos and text searches and then help residents determine whether they belong in Chicago's Blue Cart recycling program. After testing the feature with several different items, we found that it performed well in the majority of cases. However, we also found some errors. We reported them in the app's easy-to-use feedback/Help feature, and received a follow-up response within a day. However, unfortunately, to our knowledge, the error still has not been corrected several months later.

One of those errors was connected to a plastic berry container. When we submitted photographs of it, the app initially produced different answers depending on whether the front or back and bottom of the package was photographed, and neither answers identified the item as a berry container. When CRC sought clarification specifically on berry containers from both DSS and LRS (the company that manages the material recovery facility processing Chicago's recyclables), different customer service representatives provided different answers about whether the berry container would be accepted for recycling. One answer was that they were not recyclable, while another was that all plastics numbered 1, 2, 5, and 7 are accepted (berry containers are typically made from plastic #1).

This raises a larger question about information consistency throughout the recycling system. If residents encounter conflicting guidance from multiple sources, it can be difficult to know which answer to trust.

Another problem found in RC is that there can occasionally be differences between published procedures and real-world operations. One example is that for yard waste, some collection timelines or service expectations described in the app may not always align with residents' experiences. While RC cannot solve operational challenges by itself, it does provide a centralized place for residents to learn how programs are intended to work and to find guidance on where to seek assistance. In that sense, one of RC's opportunities may be to make Chicago's recycling system more transparent and accessible to residents. As user feedback continues to be incorporated, there may be opportunities to improve how operational realities and official guidance are reflected within the app.

Because the platform involves multiple partners, including the Illinois EPA, which purchased the RC platform on behalf of municipalities and counties throughout Illinois, and Recycle Coach itself, not all improvements or updates are necessarily within DSS's direct control. RC is fundamentally a communication platform, allowing municipalities to share recycling policies, collection information, and educational resources with residents in a consistent and accessible format. While the current emphasis is on recycling education and contamination reduction, the same communication tools could also help further promote waste reduction and reuse strategies, which often provide even greater environmental benefits than recycling alone. As the platform matures, CRC would welcome

discussion about whether these broader waste prevention topics could play a larger role in future educational efforts.

Overall, CRC views Recycle Coach as a positive step forward for recycling education and resident engagement in Chicago. It has the potential to make Chicago's recycling system easier for residents to understand by bringing information, guidance, and educational resources together in one place. But its long-term success will benefit from participation. The more residents use the app, search for materials, ask questions, and report inaccuracies, the more useful it can become. That feedback loop has the potential to improve not only the app itself, but also residents' understanding of why certain materials are accepted or rejected, and how recycling actually works. Increasing recycling participation and reducing contamination remains Chicago's biggest opportunities, and tools like Recycle Coach can help build the knowledge and confidence needed to make that happen. We're encouraged by what we've seen so far and optimistic about the app's potential to become an even stronger resource as more Chicagoans help shape its future.

## **About Chicago Recycling Coalition**

The [Chicago Recycling Coalition](https://chicagorecyclingcoalition.org) is a 40-year-old nonprofit organization that champions environmentally and fiscally sound management of solid waste through research, education, and advocacy. We emphasize waste reduction, reuse, recycling, composting, and buying recycled.