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## **2023 Recycling Ambassador Annual Report**

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## Our Mission

To bridge the gap between awareness and action by motivating people to reduce waste in their homes and workplaces.

## Program Background

The Recycling Ambassador (RA) Program provides training on waste reduction, recycling, composting, solid waste and effective communication skills through a six-week course, with one two-hour class each week. Participants receive a training handbook, engage in hands-on demonstrations, hear presentations from regional experts and go on a field trip to relevant sites. The program offers two courses per year in the spring and fall, at rotating locations throughout Dakota County.

RA graduates commit to volunteer 30 hours putting their skills to work to help others learn how to reduce waste. Volunteers have staffed informational booths, made presentations and worked on special projects in their neighborhoods, schools and workplaces. RA graduates share their time, knowledge and skills to build positive change and help reduce waste in Dakota County.

## Presentations and Field Trips

The course would not be successful without the support of industry experts to educate program participants. Topics discussed included:

- Week 1: Class introduction and history of waste
- Week 2: Waste prevention and reuse
- Week 3: Intro to recycling
- Week 4: Deep dive on recycling
- Week 5: Composting and food donation
- Week 6: Graduation and payback

Field trips provide participants a first-hand experience to learn more about waste management. Two field trips were offered in the spring and fall to current and past RA graduates.

## Presenters

### Dakota County

Ali Vandercook  
Renee Burman  
Jon Buck  
John Exner

Jenny Kedward  
Kristi Otterson  
Jenny Kedward  
Kirsten Wahlberg

## Community Members

**The Mulch Store**, Jake Duame  
**The Open Door Food Pantry**, Adam Hoffman  
**Reuse Minnesota**, Emily Barker  
**Minnesota Pollution Control Agency**, Tabitha Birdwell  
**Graduated Recycling Ambassadors**: Tim Smit, Karla Mckenzie, Barb Webb, Ethan Skinner, Dexter Ellingson, John Duerr, Charlotte Svobodny

## Communication

Dakota County provided ongoing support and resources to help RA graduates achieve their 30-hour volunteer hours. The best way to reach all RAs is through e-mail. Monthly e-mails provided updates, reminded participants to report hours and listed volunteer opportunities.

A webpage on the Dakota County website provided RAs with lists of new and ongoing volunteer opportunities, how to report hours and general resources.

RAs use the Facebook group regularly (257 members). Only people invited or approved can be in the private group. In 2023, group members made 128 posts which received 762 reactions and 250 comments.

## Continuing education

Dakota County provided continuing education opportunities to RA graduates. Refresher events are held annually and share new recycling information and any programmatic updates. In 2023, the Recycling Refresher was held at Western Service Center in Apple Valley. Twenty-one participants attended in-person and 5 attended virtually. The recycling refresher event was recorded and shared with RAs who couldn't attend.

## Participants

### Spring 2023

The spring RA course was held Tuesdays, March 15 – April 19 virtually via Zoom and had 28 participants.

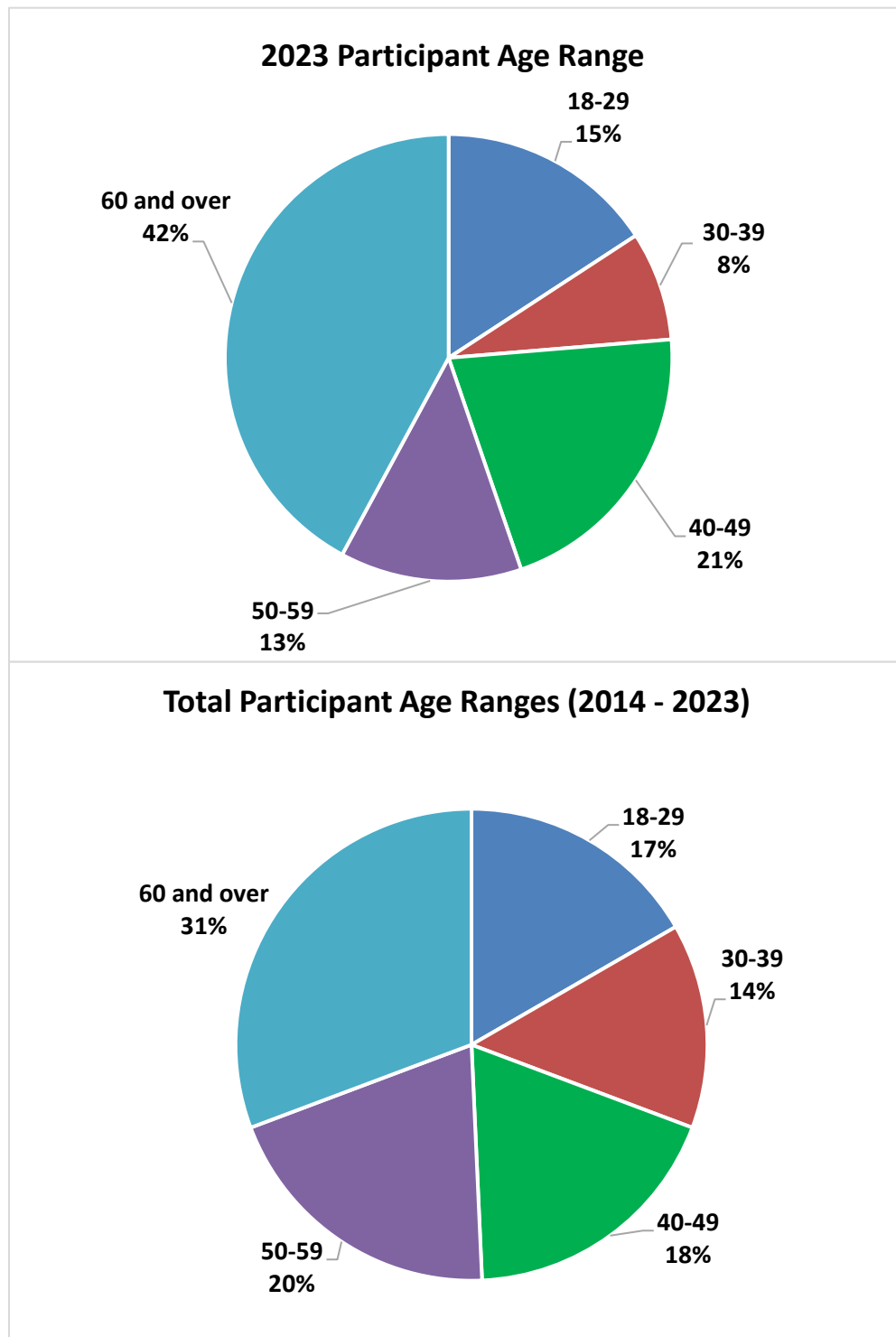


## Fall 2023

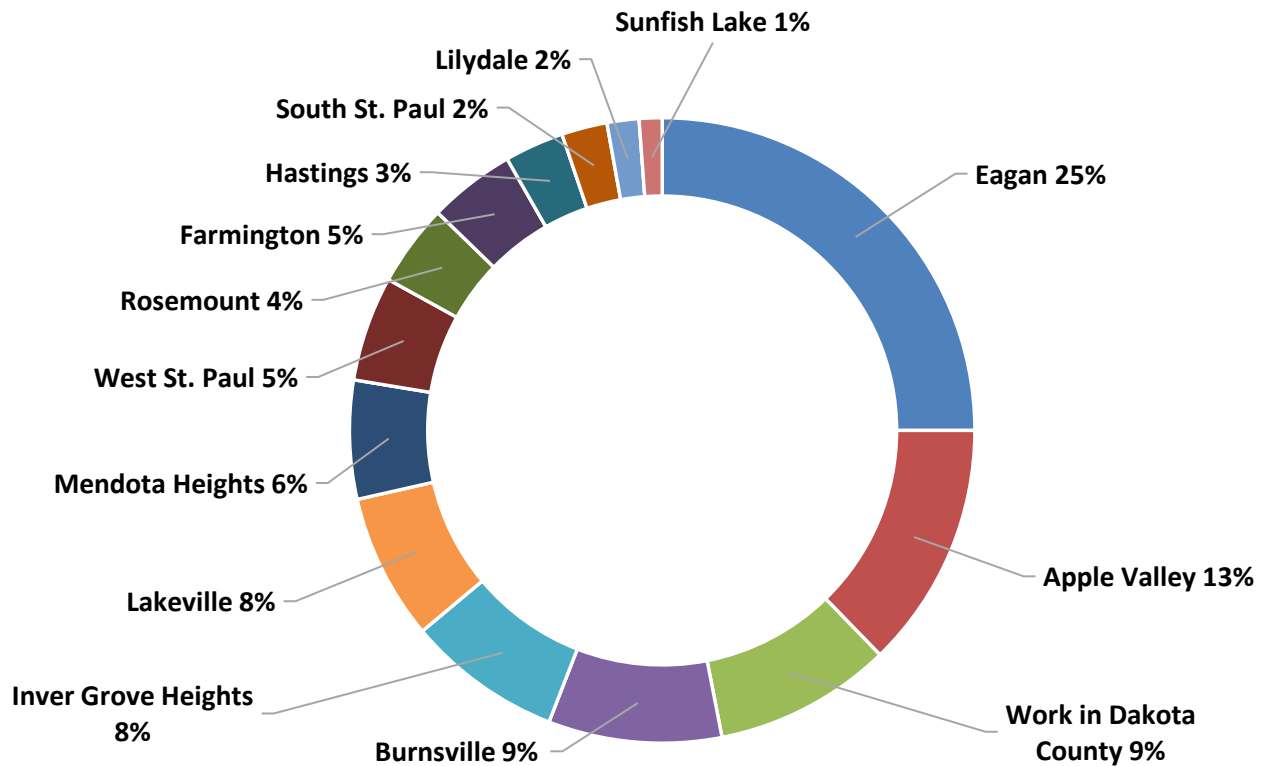
The fall RA course was held Thursdays, Oct. 6 – Nov. 9 at Lebanon Hills Visitor Center located in Eagan and had eight participants.



The participants in the 2023 RA program varied by age, background and where they live in Dakota County. The following graphs highlight what we knew about participants.



## Total RA Geographic Distribution



## Knowledge

One of the main purposes of the RA program is to provide participants with the tools and knowledge to be successful volunteers. Participants fill out a pre- and post-class test to see if they gained basic recycling knowledge.

- ▶ The RA participants answered 84 percent of the answers correctly after the course compared to 50 percent before.

Recycling certain paper and plastic items are the most challenging for residents to understand based on anecdotal outreach by Dakota County staff and statistically significant surveys of residents. Two questions in the pre- and post-class test focused on these items. Participants were asked to choose items in two categories that would go in a home recycling cart or dumpster.

## Volunteering

A key component of the RA program is volunteering. By having educated residents at events and helping to coordinate recycling projects, county and city staff are supported and able to expand programs and run events

more smoothly. Overall, RAs had a combined increase in the amount of payback hours reported over the previous year. Hour is valued at \$27.20.

Year	RA Volunteer Hours	Hourly Cost Value*	# Of Residents Engaged
2023	1,110.48	\$30,205	4,531
2022	710.73	\$19,331	4,929
2021	562.5	\$17,013	3,140
2020	514.08	\$13,983	7,729
2019	1244.26	\$33,843	12,345
2018	1087.18	\$29,571	10,290
2017	716.75	\$19,496	7,812
2016	769.00	\$20,917	11,134
2015	637.50	\$17,340	10,451
2014	502.75	\$14,164	10,229
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,583.18</b>	<b>*\$163,850</b>	<b>71,906</b>

## New Certified Recycling Ambassadors

In 2023, 36 participants graduated from the RA Program. Of those who graduated in 2023, two (2) RAs completed their 30 hours of volunteering. One in five graduates completed their payback hours (87 total). Overall, half (53%) of RAs reported some hours. There is no deadline to complete the 30 payback hours. Dakota County staff recommend achieving those hours within a year of graduation, with the understanding that not all will be able to achieve 30 hours within the first year. County staff celebrate an RA achieving their 30 hours (and increments of 30 hours), by sending them an RA sticker for their badge to display how many hours they've worked.

Thank you to the following Recycling Ambassadors who gave 30 or more hours of their time to make our world better in 2023.

- Joe Philipsek (30+), class of Spring 2023
- Cheryl Bergman (50+), class of Fall 2021
- LouAnn Arenz (50+), class of Spring 2020
- Kathy Kladstrup (100+), class of Spring 2023
- Monique Daley (100+), class of Fall 2015
- Karla McKenzie, (300+), class of Spring 2021



## Highlights

### New Program Name

The Dakota County Master Recycler and Composter (MRC) program changed its name to the Recycling Ambassador program at the beginning of 2023. This change occurred to match the program names of other counties in our region. In 2019, Ramsey County selected Recycling Ambassador for the program name after hearing from residents that the word “master” had a negative meaning due to its association with slavery. Anoka, Scott and Washington County programs followed suit. Hennepin County changed its program’s name to Community Recycling Ambassador at the end of 2022.

Dakota County is proud to align with our regional peers and to help create a sense of belonging for all residents. Staff updated webpages and resources with the new name and sent out new name badges and t-shirts for those who had materials with the old program name on them.

### Virtual Format

Many RAs have expressed interest in having access to a virtual class. To meet the needs of an ever-changing education environment, staff moved the Spring course to Zoom. Thirty-four participants registered for the class and 27 participants finished the course. When asked why people registered for the program, many noted the ease of access to the virtual class. An online training will now rotate with an in-person class every year due to the positive feedback staff received after the virtual spring course.