

Health & Safety Alert

People in Waste Containers

People are routinely seeking refuge in waste containers, exposing themselves to serious risk of harm if undiscovered prior to tipping the container into the back of a refuse collection vehicle.

Sadly, around 2-3 people are killed every year and with the number of near misses considerably higher and on the increase. ESA's largest Member companies routinely record around 100-200 near misses a year, where individuals are discovered prior to tipping into a vehicle.



Unsurprisingly, these incidents tend to be associated with larger commercial containers (typically in excess of 660 litres), eurocarts, front end loader containers, paladins and skips etc. While containers of paper/cardboard or dry mixed recycling are likely to offer a comparatively more comfortable prospect for those seeking shelter, it is worth noting that people have also been found in containers of mixed or residual wastes.

This ESA H&S alert has therefore been issued to coincide with the onset of the colder, winter months to help raise awareness of the risks of people in containers. However, the risks are not necessarily limited to winter or homeless people. ESA Members report that such incidents are just as likely to occur year-round and, furthermore, there have been as many incidents involving late-night revellers sleeping in bins as homeless people. Unfortunately, there have been tragic incidents of people having sought refuge in a container following a night out and,

often under the influence of drink or drugs, have remained unconscious during the tipping of the container into the refuse collection vehicle.

Reducing and managing the risk:

Checking containers for persons prior to engaging the container onto the lifting mechanism is quick, simple and a straightforward process. A manual check should be carried out on all large containers:

- initially check the area surrounding a container to make sure there is nothing that could have been used to access the bin. Look for 'tell-tale' signs that someone might have gained access (e.g. in the case of rough sleepers this could be rucksacks, other luggage, sleeping bags, quilts, blankets etc) or obvious signs of disturbance of the waste close to a likely point of access.
- lift the lid of the bin, taking care to ensure that the person undertaking the check does not put themselves at risk by doing so (by, for example, climbing up, or dislodging waste which might fall out)
- carry out a visual examination of the surface of the contents to look for any sign of disturbance. Physically disturbing or rummaging around in the contents of the container should be avoided and instead a suitable tool, such as a brush or shovel, which tend to be carried in the vehicle, could be used to gently move around the contents if there is suspicion or evidence of a person inside.

Drivers and loaders should be aware of the type of waste expected to be in the container. Tapping or banging the side of a container is also recommended. Any evidence of persons having been inside a container should be reported to management.



Actions to take on discovery of persons in a container

Never empty the container into the vehicle.

All instances where a person is discovered inside a container or is known to have sustained an injury as a result of being lifted and/or emptied with the contents into the collection vehicle must be immediately reported to management and where injuries are sustained medical assistance sought.

No attempts should be made to restrain any person found inside a container as there is the possibility that the person may become violent or aggressive when discovered. If the situation should escalate and the individual becomes increasingly aggressive you should get into the vehicle cab, ensuring that doors are locked, and report to management.

All incidents should be recorded and notified to management and relevant parties (even 'near misses' where no harm or injury was sustained). This information is important to help identify problem 'hotspots' and to target resources to prevent further unauthorised entry into waste containers, or review the methods of waste storage and containment with a relevant customer/client.

Further guidance and resources are available

ESA has made resources available to help improve understanding and awareness of this issue. A short video (accessed via the QR code below) can be used as a tool box talks; a [poster](#) can be displayed at offices and depots; and a [huddle card](#) aims to offer pointers for discussion and encourage crews to share thoughts, experiences and opinions.

Industry [guidance](#) is also available from the Waste Industry Safety Health Forum (WISH).

