

TOP TIPS

STOP THE CLOGS: Implementing Effective Do Not Flush Campaigns in Your Community

Wastewater agencies spend up to \$441 million *annually* to clean up unexpected clogs and equipment damage from the wrong wipes going down the drain. The usual suspects? Items that never should have been flushed in the first place, like paper towels, non-flushable wipes, and feminine products.

Many people overlook the impact of their flushing habits on home plumbing and community infrastructure. This may be due in part to a long history of confusing labeling; however, current legislation aims to rectify this issue.

California, Illinois, Washington, Oregon, Colorado, New Jersey, and Michigan have passed laws requiring non-flushable wipes, such as baby wipes, cleaning and disinfecting wipes, and other wipes not intended for flushing, to have the Do Not Flush symbol clearly displayed on packaging. Similar legislation, known as the WIPPES Act, is currently under review at the federal level.

Considering that these Do Not Flush wipes make up around 90% of wipes sold in the U.S., educating your area residents to check the wipe packaging for the symbol and other disposal instructions is key to protecting your infrastructure.

But changing behavior is notoriously difficult, even when presented with the facts. Fifty-one percent of people admit they've flushed something they knew they shouldn't, feeling that just one baby wipe wouldn't make a difference.

However, with time and consistent messaging, public education around the Do Not Flush symbol is already helping agencies reduce emergency clogs and extend equipment life. By following the steps below, your agency can help keep ratepayers' flushing behaviors trending in a positive direction.



DO NOT FLUSH

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1

Understand what residents are flushing and how to address it.

An important first step is gauging how much your customers know about what does and does not belong in a toilet. The level of flushing awareness can vary between communities, but chances are, many people don't even realize they're causing harm. A 2024 report from the Responsible Flushing Alliance found that 13% of people surveyed believed baby wipes to be flushable — and that's never the case.

To dig deeper into what residents are actually flushing, examine your facility's screens and pump stations. A recent study examined which materials cause clogs in wastewater facilities, finding that 53% of items collected were paper towels, 34% were non-flushable wipes labeled with the Do Not Flush symbol, 7% were feminine hygiene products, but



fewer than 1% were wipes labeled as flushable, and they were in the process of disintegrating, unlike all the other items. In total, 99% of non-organic items entering the wastewater facilities were items that were not supposed to be flushed in the first place.

When it comes to educating people on responsible flushing, building their trust in the packaging labels is important. More than half of US residents have

indicated that they check product packaging to see if there is a flushable or Do Not Flush designation. Encouraging everyone to look for the Do Not Flush symbol on wipes packaging — and reminding them to read all disposal instructions before flushing — can help empower your community to flush confidently and responsibly.

2

Craft your message strategically and creatively.

To share this education with your customers, your message must be designed and delivered thoughtfully, tailored to resonate with diverse audiences and encourage incremental behavioral shifts.

First, segment your audience and customize your communication. A single message rarely reaches or resonates with everyone. Tailor content by age, like homework assignments for children or engaging social media content for adults. For communities with non-English-speaking populations, it may be necessary to translate and consider cultural differences to craft an effective message.

Second, amplify your message through trusted voices. Leverage local influencers and community leaders to lend credibility and gain traction. Their endorsement transforms a public service announcement into a community-supported initiative, whether it's securing Do Not Flush signage in public facilities or championing your cause.

Finally, advocate for small, achievable changes. Behavior modification is most successful when incremental. Suggest simple solutions, like placing a lidded trash can in the bathroom or encouraging consumers to double-check wipe labels for disposal instructions. These low-effort steps can collectively lead to significant improvements in flushing behavior.

3

Join local and national campaign efforts.

As states continue passing more clear labeling laws that require Do Not Flush labels on non-flushable wipes, wastewater agencies are taking advantage of this policy shift to effect real change in their customers' flushing behavior.



Engaging with fellow wastewater agencies that have successfully executed Do Not Flush awareness campaigns can be a valuable source of knowledge exchange, providing lessons learned, effective messaging, and diverse campaign approaches to improve your outcomes. Whether by searching for these utilities online or networking at industry events, guidance from someone who understands your goals may be a call away.

Coordinating your local efforts with national campaigns boosts visibility and provides ready-made tools to amplify your message. Flush Smart Month, for example, occurs every July and unites wastewater agencies, wipes manufacturers, and public health organizations in a joint effort to reduce improper flushing. During this campaign, the Responsible Flushing Alliance and its partners rolled out free social media graphics and videos, press kits, blogs, and bilingual educational materials for all ages, promoting the use of the #FlushSmart hashtag. And the good news: These materials are evergreen and appropriate to use all year.

Agencies that align their campaigns with this national push benefit from shared visibility, improved public recall, and messaging that feels larger than a local public service announcement. While it takes planning, these campaigns pay back in the form of reduced emergencies, longer equipment life, and lower operations costs, allowing utilities to reallocate funds toward other needs.

Find free resources and learn more on the Responsible Flushing Alliance's website.

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