**Sample Op-Ed**

***provided by Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful - October 2021***

I am writing to not only share the high costs of illegal dumping and littering in our community but also to bring attention to the causes of trash issues in [community name]. On behalf of the residents, businesses, and government staff who are working tirelessly (many who volunteer) to reduce the amount of trash in our communities, we need to focus on preventing these behaviors.

The problem in our state is all too visible:

* Dumpsites can be found in all 67 counties in the state - *6,500* at last count, a conservative number. (1)
* There are also approximately *502.5 million* pieces of litter on Pennsylvania roadways. (2)
* It is a growing problem. Just in 2020 the number of reports of illegal dumping, litter, and graffiti jumped 213% over the previous year. (3)

Convicting and holding litterers and dumpers accountable for the cost of cleanups can be a strong deterrent. Enforcement is a necessary component of the solution, along with increased public education and expanding convenient and affordable trash disposal. We also need to concentrate on the underlying reasons for illegal dumping and litter. These causes are often complex and can vary per community, however issues like lack of waste and recycling infrastructure, inadequate public education, and blight--both urban and rural--must be better addressed if we are to reduce dumping and littering.

While potentially difficult to address, all taxpayers already pay a high price for illegal dumping and litter. Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful (KPB) has documented these economic costs in our communities:

* Cleanups are costly, averaging $600 per ton, or roughly $3,000 per site. (1) This diverts tax dollars and staff resources that could be better spent on community infrastructure, parks or social programs.
* Pennsylvania cities spend over *$68.5 million* *annually on litter and illegal dumping*; the bulk on clean-ups, almost 69% or *$54.5 million each year*. (4)
* Despite the large amount spent on cleanups, *a mere* $776,700 was spent on education and outreach. (4)
* Removing this trash is necessary for residents’ quality of life. However, these cleanups are reactive and alone do not deter future dumping.

In addition to the economic burden that litter and illegal dumping pose, there are additional negative impacts:

* Harming wildlife and contaminating our soil, waterways and groundwater,
* Depreciating property values,
* Attracting disease-spreading rodents and mosquitos,
* Sending a message that no one cares about the community, further eroding the quality of life. (1)

Often the communities most injured by illegal dumping, litter and graffiti are those already dealing with a myriad of challenges, both socio-economic and environmental. It is simply not fair when a small number of individuals avoid paying proper disposal fees and show a blatant disregard for how their illegally dumped trash impacts us all.

A 2020 public opinion study on litter, commissioned by KPB, which mirrored results from a previous poll on illegal dumping, found that many residents don’t take enforcement of litter and illegal dumping laws seriously:

* *84%* felt there was little likelihood people would be caught. (2)
* *37.5%* also responded they wouldn’t be likely to report littering to authorities because they felt the perpetrator would not be convicted or penalized. (2)

Historically, a hurdle in penalizing illegal dumpers and litterers has been the difficulty in obtaining concrete evidence. Additionally, high-tech surveillance equipment is often simply beyond many municipal budgets.

Since 2013 KPB has been tackling these issues through the Illegal Dump Free PA program, funded by the PA Department of Environmental Protection. The program provides loans to municipalities of easily-installed, yet highly-effective, surveillance cameras. These efforts are paying off. As of September 2021, the program has installed cameras in 54 communities that netted 87 convictions and returned over $25,000 to municipalities and state agencies in fines, restitution, and court fees.

Another powerful enforcement tool comes from 2018’s PA Act 62, which strengthened existing litter and dumping statutes. This law:

* *Mandated* community service of *5 - 30 hours* for first time offenders cited under the crimes code.
* Increased optional hours for subsequent offences to *30 – 100 hours*.
* Created Litter Enforcement Corridors where fines are *doubled* or *tripled*.

In closing, enforcement along with ensuring affordable, accessible disposal and public education are all essential to reducing littering and illegal dumping. Through strong partnerships among government, non-profits, and industry, KPB believes that we can ultimately change the habits and behavior of others and significantly reduce trash in our communities.

[Name, contact info]

# References

1. **Nestor Resources, Inc; Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful.** *Illegal Dumping in Pennsylvania, a Decade of Discovery.* 2014.

2. **Burns & McDonnell; Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful.** *Pennsylvania Litter Research Study.* 2020.

3. **Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful.** *llegal Dumping Across PA in 2020.* 2020.

4. **Burns & McDonnell; Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful.** *The Cost of Litter & Illegal Dumping in Pennsylvania, a Study of Nine Cities Across the Commonwealth.* 2020.

All of the above resources are available at https://www.keeppabeautiful.org/research/