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## ID recycling?

Security to be tightened at Eco-Cycle following reports of document theft

*By Ben Ready  
The Daily Times-Call*

BOULDER — Think twice about throwing sensitive, unshredded papers into your recycling bin, says a convicted thief who claims he watched some of his companions pocket personal documents at Eco-Cycle's Boulder facility.

The head of the Boulder County Jail's alternative-sentencing programs and the director of Eco-Cycle promised to beef up security at the plant after a complaint that a handful of inmates — those serving community service sentences — and Eco-Cycle staff are stealing documents.

"Ned" — who asked to remain anonymous out of fear of retribution from Boulder County Jail officials and fellow offenders — said he spent the past five Sundays sorting paper and mixed recyclables at Eco-Cycle's processing facility on 63rd Street as part of his sentence for a theft conviction.

Ned and about 30 others in the jail's Work Crew Program typically spend Saturdays and Sundays working manual labor jobs for local governments and nonprofits in lieu of jail time.

According to Ned, jail volunteers and paid Eco-Cycle staff alike snagged credit card statements, bank statements, medical records, blank checks and documents containing Social Security numbers off conveyor belts while they sorted recyclables at the plant.

One man, he said, filled the front pocket of his sweatshirt with papers before going home.

On an hourly basis, Ned said, he watched workers stop to look at information from recycled documents.

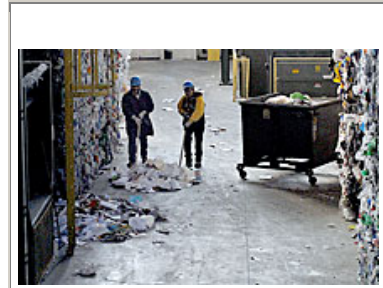
"If one of the inmates does something, I keep it to myself," Ned said. "I like my face the way it is."

Workers sorting paper are constantly tempted, he said.

One day, Ned said, he picked up a signed but otherwise blank check but put it back on the line. It bothers his conscience that others are swiping materials. He said he felt more comfortable coming to the Times-Call than telling jail staff.

Eco-Cycle director Eric Lombardi said that in the 30 years since he founded the nonprofit, no cases of identity theft have been traced to its four locations or processing plant. That includes the last 10 years in which Eco-Cycle augmented its labor force with jail inmates and alternative-sentencing crews.

On Thursday, Lombardi met with Sgt. Doug Caven, the jail's alternative-sentencing director; Boulder County resource conservation manager Jeff Callahan; and Eco-Cycle operations engineer Lou Perez to discuss security improvements.



Workers sweep up piles of paper that fell from the sort line at the Eco-Cycle facility in Boulder on Thursday. Volunteer workers from the Boulder County Jail or other convicts with alternative sentencing may have been stealing recycled papers with sensitive materials on them at Eco-Cycle. **Times-Call/Joshua Buck**

Boulder County owns the processing building and contracts with Eco-Cycle, which runs it. Eco-Cycle pays the jail about \$10 per inmate worker per day, Lombardi said. The money goes to jail and victim-advocate programs.

Eco-Cycle has a total of 55 employees. Mondays through Saturdays, 30 of them work at the Boulder facility, along with about 13 jail inmates and work crew members. The 60,000-square-foot plant is usually closed Sundays, but managers kept it open over the past five Sundays with a staff of 30 jail work crew members to sort through a backlog of materials caused by recent snowstorms.

Both Eco-Cycle supervisors and jail crew bosses — Boulder County Sheriff's Office employees who watch over minimum-security jail workers but aren't deputies and don't carry guns — keep an eye on crews. A crew boss typically watches 10 to 30 inmates, Caven said.

According to Caven and Perez, they make rounds past the workers, stand at second-story observation decks and sit in production offices with a view of most of the facility. Ned said that during his Sundays at Eco-Cycle, the crew bosses spent most of their time in break rooms. Caven said he'll be looking into that allegation.

Every hour for six hours, the workers watch 20 tons of printed material stacked a foot deep as it cruises past them at 170 feet a minute, pulling out anything that isn't recyclable. Most of it isn't sensitive: newspapers, advertising fliers, magazines, school notebooks, phonebooks and generic junk mail. But not everyone who recycles shreds sensitive documents.

"We don't screen material that comes into the recycling facility," Lombardi said. "If someone has something confidential, it's their responsibility to protect it."

Eco-Cycle forbids employees from taking recycled materials home without special permission, Lombardi said.

And Perez said that on numerous occasions, Eco-Cycle and jail sorters have found wallets, wedding rings, valid passports and even wads of cash and turned them over to supervisors or crew bosses.

In two weeks, the sheriff's office will hire two new crew bosses to work exclusively at Eco-Cycle, Caven and Callahan said. But Caven said that decision came before Ned's allegations that some workers were pocketing documents. In addition, he said, everyone at Eco-Cycle will be retrained.

"I've never had anything like this brought to my attention," Caven said Thursday. "Today, I get to start working on it. I don't care how I became aware of it; I'm aware of it now. I need to start looking and dealing with this."

Work-release inmates aren't much of an identity-theft threat because they are searched every evening before re-entering the jail, Caven said.

Occasionally, jail staff catch an inmate trying to bring a pornographic magazine or a plastic toy into the jail from Eco-Cycle, or stashing them somewhere in transit, Caven said. Jail workers have never caught inmates with anything they could use to steal someone else's identity, he said.

Alternative-sentence work crew members, however, go home after a day's work at Eco-Cycle without being strip-searched or patted down, Caven said.

"The people we're seeing coming through work crew are mostly misdemeanor offenders, DUIs or domestic violence cases," he said. "Are these really people involved in identity theft?"

Caven added that the county and Eco-Cycle treat inmates and weekend work crews respectfully and will not conduct unjustified or unreasonable searches.

“Why should the work crew guys get searched (routinely), and not the Eco-Cycle guys, if the accusation is against both?” he asked. “We’re not here to humiliate these guys.”

While Eco-Cycle and jail officials said they’ll do what they can to investigate allegations of past theft and tighten security in the future, they urge residents who recycle to rip papers with potentially sensitive information in two or three pieces. Highly sensitive information, such as medical records and Social Security, credit card and bank account numbers, should be shredded by a machine.

“There’s no doubt there’s a need to raise public awareness. This issue needs exposure,” Lombardi said. “We live in an information age where identity theft is everywhere.”

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