

Local law has secret weapon: Trash collectors

By Nathan C. Gonzalez
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It's just after 9 a.m. and Travis Morrill and his 64,000-pound green garbage truck are rumbling through a normally quiet neighborhood. He grabs the joystick controlling the truck's robotic arm, lifts up a curbside trash cart and empties the load of garbage into the truck's 28-cubic-yard bin. To the untrained eye, Morrill might simply be a run-of-the mill trash collector. But to area police he's an ally, an extra set of eyes and a deterrent to crime.

"Next to the mailman, we pretty much see these neighborhoods more than anybody else," Morrill said as he checked his mirrors and pulled away from the curb en route to the next house.

Broken car windows, suspicious vehicles, loiterers, even moving trucks or vans - drivers for garbage collector Waste Management are trained as part of their jobs to note anything suspicious and report it to police.

"A lot of times you get to know these people. You say, 'I've never seen that guy on that porch before,'" said Morrill, who has worked in Midvale for more than six years.

Though the company began its Waste Watch program in Utah last year, officials and drivers of 120 routes along the Wasatch Front have worked with local law enforcement for three years, said C. Lance Allen, market area general manager for Waste Management. "People think the truck is invisible," Allen said.

Residents and potential criminals alike don't realize the local garbage hauler is as familiar with area neighborhoods as those who live there, Allen said. Many drivers have held the same routes for several years and can notice the smallest changes.

From several days of rolled-up newspapers in the driveway, a driver can tell if a homeowner is out of town. A warehouse or home lit up at the wrong time of day or an open door can also indicate a potential problem. "It's the little things like that, that people don't notice. We are able to see things that are not normal," Allen said.

The Waste Watch program is similar to others once used by utility workers and meter readers, said Midvale police Sgt. John Salazar. "It's always nice to have extra eyes and ears in the community," he said.

Waste Management's drivers must pass a criminal background check, said Tim Evanich, district manager for the company. They are then trained - sometimes by local police - to watch for people calling for help, anyone removing license plates or other items from vehicles, and other suspicious activity.

Drivers have reported car accidents, possible stolen cars, and an unconscious man found in an open field. When police arrived, they found the man sleeping, Evanich said. On his route, Morrill recalled seeing a man and woman arguing outside their home. Morrill said he grew concerned for the woman's safety, but the situation appeared to end when the man saw the garbage truck rolling toward the home.

"It makes you wonder, if you weren't there, what would have actually happened?" Morrill said.

* **The Waste Watch program** is active in 37 communities on 120 routes served by Waste Management along the Wasatch Front. For more information, call 801-282-8256.