

# Making Leonia Styrofoam-free

By N. Dini Checko, ANJEC Resource Center

What does it take to start and spread a movement? Inspiration, action and community. In the small Bergen County Borough of Leonia, a grassroots group of community activists are working towards progress and inclusivity in their town and beyond. Christie Evens, Leonia Action Alliance (LAA) member, was inspired to tackle climate change by eliminating single-use plastics. Since plastic is made primarily from fossil fuels, it contributes to climate change and pollutes at every stage – from materials extraction to product production to waste disposal.

Evens targeted one specific type of single-use plastic, disposable food service containers made of polystyrene foam, commonly known as Styrofoam. The International Agency for Research on Cancer has declared that styrene, a chemical found in Styrofoam, is a known neurotoxin and suspected carcinogen. Evens deduced that “eliminating Styrofoam is something we can do locally, especially

since it’s not a necessity, and this can scale up to help reduce climate change and improve lives.”

Over the past 18 months, Evens, LAA and the Leonia Environmental Commission (LEC) implemented an in-depth strategy aimed at education and passing an ordinance that banned polystyrene disposable food containers while promoting the recycling of clean, white expandable polystyrene. This strategy was broken down into five key elements: research, education, awareness, reduction and elimination. There are a lot of moving parts to this campaign and this article highlights just a few.

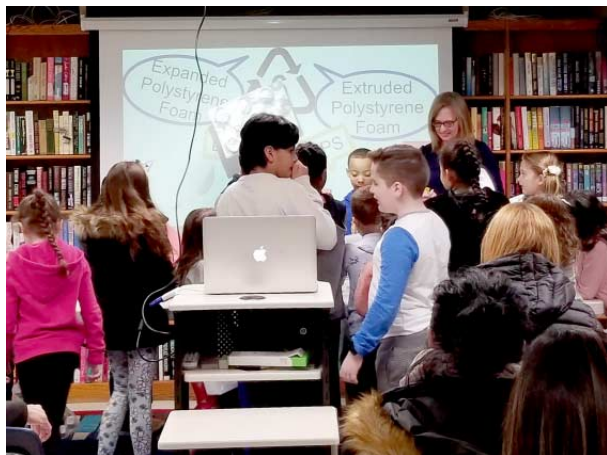
Starting in the summer of 2017, LAA and local Girl Scouts began a Styrofoam awareness/collection program for Leonia residents and businesses. Before the Girl Scouts began canvassing businesses for support, they gained a better understanding of the problem by participating in an interactive, hands-on presentation on the “Science of Styrofoam” that taught chemical composition, material

biodegradability and ecology.

Leonia has a diverse population, so the Girl Scouts distributed informational fliers to local businesses in multiple languages (English, Spanish, Korean and Chinese).

*Local Scouts played a key role in Leonia's Styrofoam drive* Photo by Jessie Glass





*Leonia Sciece of Styrofoam classroom presentation*

By last fall, all schools in Leonia were Styrofoam-free. The school superintendent and Board of Education worked with the school food vendor to successfully switch to compostable lunch trays. A key element was Leonia's commitment to join Sustainable Jersey for Schools, which provided the funding for new trays.

The various community partners pressed forward by making public presentations in local schools, the public library and to the Rotary Club. Qualified and respected speakers added to the credibility of the message. For example, Dr. Jimmy Meltzer, a Leonia resident, father and attending physician in the Division of Pediatric Emergency Medicine at the Department of Pediatrics of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, spoke at the Rotary of the Palisades about the hazards of Styrofoam, especially for growing children.

The Girl Scouts gave out environmental award certificates and window sticker medallions to stores that promised not to use or sell Styrofoam. Recipients included Leonia Borough offices, schools, organizations, churches, and the local synagogue. The coalition shared announcements of the Styrofoam-Free awards and other information about the campaign with local newspapers and social media.

The next step was passing an ordinance banning Styrofoam in the town. Thanks to all the footwork done by LAA, LEC and

Girls Scouts within the community, the Council was open to considering an ordinance. Councilman Bill Ziegler, also the LEC liaison, championed the ordinance and last December the Leonia Borough Council unanimously passed a ban on foam disposable food service ware.

Leonia inspired other Bergen County towns to tackle the Styrofoam problem. Last October, Sustainable Jersey awarded the Bergen County Hub a \$6,177 grant to promote the recycling of EPS Styrofoam packaging, and encourage the reduction

and elimination of XPS Styrofoam food service-ware.

The Hub's plans include six Styrofoam drives for the twelve member towns over the next couple of years. For this program to be successful, they need access to recycling bins, an EPS densifier, trucks and drivers. The leaders have applied for additional grants through the Bergen County Utility Authority and have confirmed Suez as a corporate sponsor.

Not content to rest on their laurels, a core group of environmental commission and green team members are engaging with the Bergen County Freeholders to push for a countywide Styrofoam ban, and individual towns are using Leonia's strategy and methods to pass their own ordinances.

The comprehensive State bill (S2776/A4330) that would ban single-use plastic carryout bags, straws, and polystyrene foam food service products statewide is still awaiting committee hearings in the Senate and Assembly. However, as we have seen with Leonia and the Bergen County Styrofoam-Free Hub, perseverance is key to success. Contact your legislators and let them know why this important and to take action immediately. 💧

### **For more information**

Leonia Action Alliance –

<http://leoniaactionalliance.org>

How to urge the State Legislature to pass the Plastic Pollution bill – <http://bit.ly/pvanjec>