

# Homeboy expands into a new industry – recycling clothes

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Caleigh Wells



Chanalisa Sera navigates a forklift around hundreds of boxes of clothes in a Commerce warehouse. Some are tattered and worn out, others haven't been used at all. Her job: to keep them from going to a landfill.

Sera works for Homeboy Threads, a new for-profit arm of the mission-driven organization that rehabilitates and trains formerly gang-affiliated and incarcerated people.

"I learned the forklift, I learned how to input weights and data entry into the computers," Sera says of her job. "I learned how to sell things online, on e-com. I never, never in my life thought I would know how to do any of that stuff."

Sera started as a trainee with Homeboy Industries a year and a half ago and became the first full-time employee at Homeboy Threads. Now she supervises the next cohort of trainees and teaches them what she's learned.



Hundreds of boxes of clothes wait to be resold, repaired or recycled. Photo by Caleigh Wells.

The trucks bringing in loads of clothes for Sera to sort are filled with company inventory that didn't sell, rolls of fabric that didn't get used, or worn materials that customers returned to the store.

Homeboy can profit in a few ways: They can just sort the clothes for a company and hand them back; fix or sew new clothes and sell them; sell the raw materials to be recycled into a new medium, such as insulation.

Homeboy Threads CEO Chris Zwicke explains it's a labor-intensive process: "Sorting out all the different pieces: what's used, what could be resold, what needs to be repaired, or what's completely beyond salvage and needs to be recycled."

Some of the clothes in the warehouse belong to the clothing company GUESS. It worked with Homeboy for more than a year in a pilot project before it publicly announced its launch last week.

“Initially we started the pilot with store returns, damages, irregular product,” explains Director of Brand Partnerships Nicolai Marciano. “Since the launch of our pilot program in December 2021, Homeboy’s received over 200,000 pounds of garments to avoid ending up in landfill.”

Textiles are California’s fastest growing landfill waste. U.S. consumers toss about 81 pounds of clothes every year, and buy a new piece of clothing every five or six days. That’s about five times as much as we were buying 40 years ago.

But Zwicke says he’s seeing more consumers and companies who want to know where their unsellable clothes are ending up. “Corporations are more sensitive to the idea now that there is no ‘away’ when you throw something away. It’s actually going somewhere.”

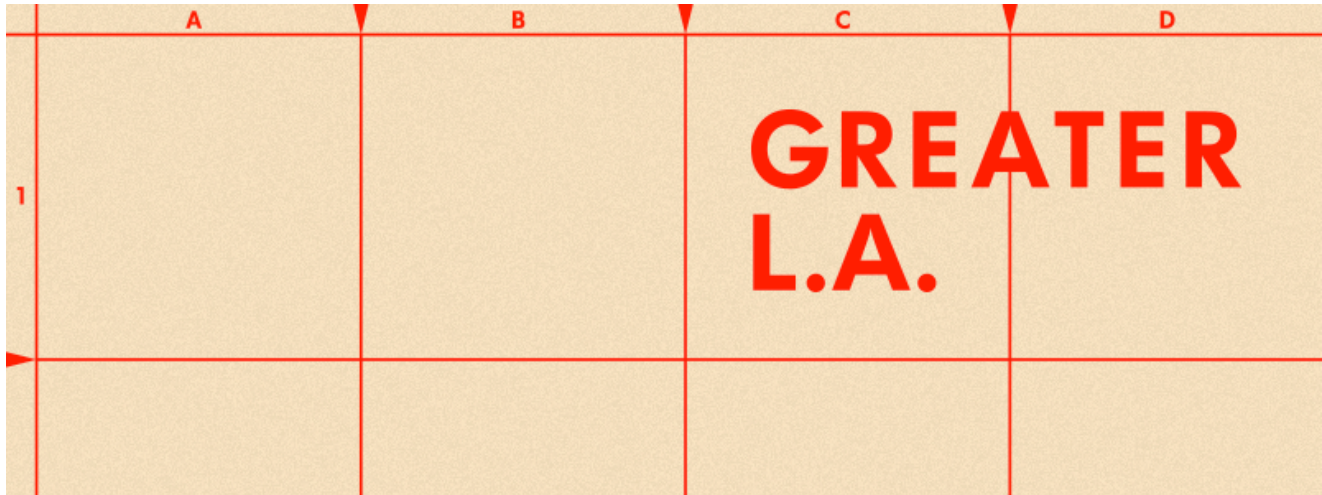


Zwicke leads Homeboy Electronics Recycling and its new recycling venture, Homeboy Threads. Photo by Caleigh Wells.

Homeboy Threads is coming online just in time. California politicians introduced a bill this year called the Responsible Textile Recovery Act of 2023, which would require producers to figure out how to collect and recycle reusable clothes and textiles. That means there could be

a spike in demand for authorized collectors to do all that sorting and repair for companies.

“It's a gap in the market that we've seen, and that we're filling kind of with our workforce development mission,” says Zwicke. “We're here to create jobs, and there's a lot of kind of manual work that goes into what we do.”



### Your contact info

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We'll be in touch if we look into your question.