

Goodwill project finds clothing repair sustainable, but expensive

missionlocal.org/2023/06/goodwill-project-finds-clothing-repair-sustainable-but-expensive

June 18, 2023



Clothing and other textiles are winding up in landfills at ever-increasing rates, but in a recent Goodwill project, funded by the San Francisco Environment Department, more than 700 garments were repaired and sold, rather than going to the dump.

The California Product Stewardship Council organized the pilot, which kicked off in November 2020, and ended this month. With a \$120,000 grant from SF Environment, workers set aside high-end items donated to Goodwill in San Francisco — items that would sell for \$45 or more, if they weren't ripped or stained.

Stained items were cleaned by a local co-friendly business, Savvy Green Cleaners, while workers with Potrero's Designing a Difference Sewing House and fashion students at San Francisco State University repaired and sometimes refashioned damaged clothing. Once in pristine shape, Goodwill sold the items through its online store.



“It was a fun project to be a part of,” said Rebecca Cahua, Designing a Difference’s founder. Her team repaired or upcycled a few hundred items. “It could be a missing button or a zipper replacement, a hole or rip.” In some cases, garments were “pretty unrepairable, but there’s a good amount of fabric. I took a leather coat and made it into a really cute leather bunny, and everybody wanted it,” she laughed.

Subscribe to our daily newsletter and have the latest stories from Mission Local delivered directly to your inbox.

Over the course of the pilot, workers cleaned and repaired more than 1,000 garments, and discovered that “it’s not cheap to do a quick sew or a redesign,” said Connie Ulasewicz, a former fashion professor at SFSU. The cost to clean a stained garment averaged \$17.34, while sewing and repair costs ranged from \$21 to \$34. Although the spiffed-up items were projected to sell upwards of \$45, the average sale price was \$31.

So, although the project successfully kept more than 700 garments out of landfills, supported local businesses and inspired students and designers, the costs involved in cleaning and mending garments would be a significant barrier to continuing the work, Julie Bryant, director of sustainability for Goodwill San Francisco Bay, said during the presentation.

“These are expensive endeavors,” Bryant said. “It requires labor and extensive training. We are excited about the possibility of hiring someone to do garment repair. It very much aligns with our mission. But it requires funding, to be really honest.”

Decades and centuries ago, people patched and mended their clothing until it was in tatters, and then used the rags for cleaning, weaving rugs, making quilts or other uses. Industrialization and globalization have changed all that.



Over the past 30 years, fast-fashion brands like Shein, H&M, Zara, Forever 21 and Uniqlo have dominated the clothing industry. They release new clothing lines frequently, creating demand for up-to-the-minute fashions. At the same time, fast fashion is often made with inexpensive synthetic fabrics (polyester chief among them) that fall apart quickly and don't break down in landfills.



Garments that were repaired and upcycled during the pilot.
Photo courtesy of the California Product Stewardship Council.

Thrift stores like Goodwill and Savers take in a portion of these unwanted garments, but only a fraction. About 85 percent of discarded garments wind up in municipal waste streams, according to a 2020 report from Resource Recycling Systems.

The Environmental Protection Agency estimated that, in 2017, textiles (including clothes, shoes and linens) made up 4.5 percent of the waste stream, for a total of 14.3 million tons, 12.8 million of which were clothing and shoes. These textiles are most commonly made of cotton or polyester,. While cotton and other natural fibers will biodegrade over time, polyester and similar synthetics don't.

Damaged fast-fashion items weren't eligible to be part of the Goodwill pilot, because it didn't make financial sense to clean or mend them just to sell them for a few dollars, said Joanne Brasch, special projects manager for the California Product Stewardship Council, in an [online presentation](#) in late May.

Repairing donated goods so more of them can be sold is just a small piece of the puzzle. Ultimately, clothing brands and retailers need to be responsible for their products after they're sold, to develop a "circular economy" that includes repairing and redesigning damaged items, and to recycle what can't be reused, Bryant said.

To that end, the California Product Stewardship Council is currently sponsoring a state bill, [SB 707](#), which would require producers to create a stewardship program for collecting and recycling their products after they're sold and used. It passed on the Senate floor, 32-8, on May 31, and next heads to the Assembly.

"We want to get the brands...Who've washed their hands clean of responsibility to take responsibility," Brasch said.

LATEST NEWS...

[Crashes, confusion on unfinished Valencia St. center bike lane](#)

[Mission leaders call for peace in wake of shootings](#)

[How cop settlements are decided — and how they are spent](#)

You matter. Every \$ you give helps us cover the city.

We rely on you, our readers, to fund our journalism.

Your contribution is essential to our efforts.

Follow Us
