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The St. Vincent de Paul Society of Lane County employs 500 people and diverts 17.8 million pounds of reusable/recyclable materials from landfills annually thanks to its three mattress recycling facilities, glass foundry, wood shop, appliance repair and recycling workshop, 13 retail thrift stores, and its fashion designer, who creates a range of products from materials that are too damaged to sell. The Eugene OR-based nonprofit has become so successful at its job-creation waste-diversion mission that it received a generous grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to help other nonprofits start similar waste-based businesses. The goal of the grant is to create jobs for people with barriers to employment.

Two years into the grant, St. Vincent's has developed a network, known as the Cascade Alliance, comprised of 13 nonprofits, located largely on the east and west coasts. They are diverting a range of materials: mattresses, window glass, wax, furniture and housewares, computers and electronics, clothing and textiles, books and media, post-manufacturing products, construction materials, appliances, CFCs and propane. The revenue from those businesses supports the social mission of the nonprofits, easing their dependence on donations and grants.

NATIONAL SMM Plan Recommendations:

Locally driven: Waste materials and waste policies are among the most hyper-local of issues. Developing national systems for materials management will be challenging for this reason. Where landfill fees are low, diversion and recycling rates are correspondingly low, especially for hard-to-handle materials. When costs for landfilling are lower than costs for recycling, it's much harder for anyone to embrace diversion. While our Cascade Alliance members collaborate, not all our strategies work at all our locations because of these differences. Managing materials sustainably will require bottom-up solutions involving local governments, businesses and nonprofits uniquely situated to understand how and why local systems function the way they do. What works in California may not work in Michigan or Mississippi for reasons that can involve weather and geology as much as political leadership or community will.

Culture change: Communication between manufacturers and reusers/recyclers is vital. Design decisions on the front end often have unexpected consequences at the product's end of life. For example, mattress manufacturers who make pocket coil mattresses with metal springs individually encased in fabric, have created a product that so slows deconstruction many recyclers simply landfill the mattresses rather than dealing with them. Getting designers together with deconstruction crews to look at the downstream impacts of their decisions would further materials management discussions in a meaningful way.