

Shelters Reuse Common Items to Help People and Animals

By David Goldstein, Ventura County PWA, IWMD

Some discards are difficult to recycle but wonderful to reuse. Items made from multiple material types, categories of commodities with poor markets, and items with the potential to tangle sorting lines are better repurposed than recycled.

One surprising reusable item is used mascara wands. The Appalachian Wildlife Refuge has found these unrecyclable items are perfect for cleaning animals in distress. The bristles are so close together, the brushes enable volunteers to remove oil, larvae, fly eggs, mites, and mud from rescued wildlife. The brushes also work great for animal medical care and wound treatment, according to the organization's web site. The refuge asks donors to clean used mascara wands with liquid soap, place wands in a clean plastic bag and mail them to P.O. Box 1211, Skyland, NC, 28776.

Closer to home, homeless shelters need essential personal care items, and most are not covered by food stamps (now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). For sanitary reasons, many of these items must be in new, unopened condition, but even some unopened items are used. For example, if you do not like the type of free toothbrush and small tube of toothpaste you received from your dentist following a cleaning, and if these are still sealed in their packaging, they are perfect for donating.

Similarly, if you did not open the complimentary shampoo, conditioner, hand lotion, and shower cap in your hotel room, donate those too. For "safety and hygiene reasons" most homeless shelter programs "request only unopened/unused items" for personal care according to Mark Alvarado, Homeless Assistance Coordinator for the City of Oxnard. For these reasons, shelters usually accept only new underwear, socks, hair brushes, combs, and nail clippers. These are essential items generally not available from thrift stores and therefore unaffordable to many homeless people, so donations of these are needed only in new condition. However, many shelters can accept used, freshly cleaned sweat shirts, hoodies, and sweat pants.

Shoes are problematic; donating them often imposes a burden on shelters, which must pay a disposal cost to get rid of used shoes. However, there is one related item frequently discarded by everyone but desired by homeless shelters. Used shoelaces can be donated. Next time you discard a pair of shoes with laces still in good condition, consider removing the laces, cleaning them, and donating them to a homeless shelter.

Alvarado noted in an email, "The shelter is not intended to be, nor do we have the storage room to serve as, a drop-off facility for discards of clothing, books, toys etc. There are other non-profits -Goodwill, ARC, Salvation Army for example- which would be more appropriate places for receipt of such types of donations." However, he noted some additional items needed, even if in good but used condition. These include a large coffee pot, a microwave oven, and heavy-duty three-prong extension cords.

Prior to delivering any donations, call the Oxnard shelter directly at 805-247-0335. The shelter currently hosts over 100 people, has limited staff, and organizes many activities, so they are not able to carefully screen donations or give tours.

The Ventura County Animal Shelter also needs clean, used items. The shelter, in Camarillo, is collecting donations of used blankets, towels, and other materials to meet the needs of the 500 animals they are hosting. During the recent fires, the shelter hosted 900 animals and went through much of its supply. Additional needed items are listed at www.vcas.us/amazonwishlist , and a donation page is at www.vcas.us/donate . People can drop off items at the shelter: 600 Aviation Drive, Camarillo, CA 93010; 9am-6pm Tuesday-Sunday. The shelter is closed on Mondays, but people can also drop off items from 8am-8pm on Mondays if they are unable to come during open hours, according to Jennifer Thaler, Supervising Animal Control Officer.