

ReCycling Program

Written by Eric May

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Established in 2002, our car seat recycling program has a goal of recycling every expired, damaged, recalled or unuseable car seat we receive. Car seats are made of many recycleable components, but due to the labor required for deconstruction, most regular municipal recycling programs can not or will not take them. They do not have the resources to deal with a complex assembly like a car seat. This is where our program begins.

Begun by Bill Flinchbaugh out of frustration over old car seats ending up in the dumpster following car seat safety events. The collection of these 'old' car seats began and started to fill his garage while he worked with his local municipal recycling contractor to establish a process for handling and recycling his ever expanding collection of 'old' seats. While this process did allow him to establish one of the most complete collections of sample car seats available, the garage was filling up and his local recycler was in no hurry to take on more work. Almost a year later, he began developing a relationship with the Court system to attract 'volunteers' with a court mandated responsibility to give a little back to the community. Initially these volunteers assisted with car seat events in the area. Recognizing the labor pool he was collecting, Bill soon had these folks breaking down the car seats in the garage. Now he had most of the pieces in place and a plan was established with the local recycling contractor.

In late 2003, as Bill was finding himself with the opportunity to take on CCASAF, he was also encouraging local thrift stores and used children's goods stores to stop selling used car seats. Initial resistance was overcome by offering to collect the car seats received and provide assistance to families seeking car seats from the retailers. With a plan for used seat collection, an abundance of seats to assist families in need, a labor force to deconstruct old seats and some modest storage, all that was missing was a collection method.

Long a shade tree mechanic, Bill had been following the changes in tax code related to vehicle donations. With a relationship established from another foundation whose board he had served on, Bill began to ask friends with older box truck moving vehicles for a candidate for donation. (More on vehicle donation programs to follow.) A candidate truck was identified and the final puzzle piece was in place. The process is collection, inspection, sorting, counting, deconstruction, sorting component materials and delivery to the recycling center.

In 2005, over 750 car seats were collected and recycled. Our pace for 2006 exceeded 1200 seats. The volume of car seats collected in 2007 was just over 2000. We have already exceeded that number in June 2008 and are on pace to handle over 4000 this current year. Had I known what the success of this program might be, I would have done things a little differently. Additionally, the information on this web page has generated hundreds of phone calls from around the country. With assistance given to hospitals, community service organizations, local governments and many others, we now know of over 100 similar programs either up and running or getting close to operation across this great land. The efforts of those individuals are local and we take no credit other than maybe a little inspiration. Thank you to all of the folks who have taken this idea and made it theirs!

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The weight of the collected and recycled materials has not been calculated with precision, but it is considerable. We figure for 2007 alone, about 1t tons of material was diverted from the landfill. What are the other green footprint aspects of this effort. We are working on that. to help you get an idea, an average car seat is about 15 pounds of #5 plastic (most common), cloth, foam, nylon harnesses, some polystyrene plastic and some metal. The bulk of the weight is the car seat shell made of the #5 plastic. This plastic, though not in high demand, is easily recyclable and often returns to us as outdoor furniture, plastic lumber, other children's products or butter tubs. Most deliveries made to the local recycler are between a pickup truck load and a partly or full 15 foot box truck. All recyclable components are delivered to the recycler. Non-recyclable parts, mostly nylon harness straps, some polystyrene, foam and some cloth, are currently sent to the land fill. Some natural fabric cloth covers are used for cleaning rags, given to quilters, used for cloth paper making classes or kept for seats in our loaner program. Synthetic fiber covers are a little more challenging. There are some area where they are collected for rug making or other re=processing.

Our 2008 numbers saw about a 4 fold increase in recycling activity, but with the various levels of economic slow down, the market for #5 has dropped off. In that light, I must remind all the readers of this page, that we, the consumer, are the challenge here. We want plastic recycled, but we want to buy "new" products. If we do not purchase products, made of recycled content, the many manufacturers who buy this bulk plastic will not make more products of recycled content. We must change our ways to make the system work. I stroll the isles of my local big box store or home supply center and I see one half the products made from recycled content than I did a year ago. Hence the reduced market for the old car seat shells. I buy anything I can if it shows recycled plastic content, yet I see the same stack of goods sit until the retailer moves it back into the stock room. Where does it go from there, I do not know, but I have my ideas. At the risk of beating this to death, we must be willing to invest in recycled content products, and accept that recycled and new are the same.

-> Quick note; I returned from the 2008 Kidz in Motion Conference where there was a session on 'Be Green, Recycle car seats!'. Hurray to to Tammy for her outstanding work in Oregon!

As we move through 2009, our collection activity is up over even 2008, but demand for plastic for recycling is almost zero. I am struggling under the weight of consumers who mail me car seats, bad idea. Additionally, folks drop them off at my house, with out prior contact or a note saying who left the car seat; I can not have that. I have a 6000 foot warehouse that is 2/3 full of car seats that have no market. If this continues, see the consumer remarks in the 2008 section, we will have to discontinue the program. I can not be a drop off point at home, and I can not support from my pocket a program that costs more to operate than our car seat assistance and distribution program. We need folks to step up and support the whole system. Donate so we can afford to recycle, get your car seats checked and make a contribution for the service, then buy products made from recycled materials. My passion will not be able to continue to support this program, we need you.

Additional details will be added as they develop, are discovered or shared with us. Check back here or my 'blog' page..