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E-waste recycling up, but there's a long way to go

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Two years after its enactment, a New York state law governing the recycling of electronic waste is making an impact according to a progress report. The study from the Product Stewardship Institute (PSI) shows more involvement from industry, but a number of the big box retailers are still lagging behind.



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New York state residents produce more than 300 million pounds of electronic waste each year. And the number of outdated computers, phones, televisions and appliances are continuing to pile up.

Most of these items contain hazardous materials, and in 2011 the state passed a law mandating that manufacturers create programs to collect used consumer electronics, and recycle them.

The plan was to reduce the cost burden on local governments and make it easier for consumers to keep their old electronics out of landfills.

According to the PSI report, the number of collection sites for electronic scrap has increased by nearly 80 percent since the program was launched.

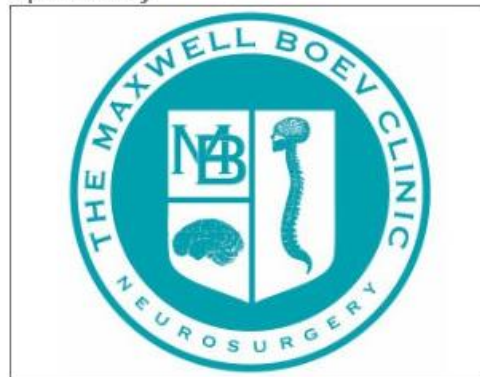
Institute CEO and founder Scott Cassel says while it's definitely easier for consumers to recycle their electronics, there's still more work to be done.

"We want there to be more convenient options. You can't tell residents to recycle if it's going to be inconvenient for them. So, it's the awareness and it's the increased opportunities for collection."

Cassel says it's also important for retailers to get involved.

Some of the big players like Walmart, Amazon and Sears still don't have a recycling option for the electronics they sell.

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International standards needed for e-waste recycling

Additionally, he says there needs to be more focus on developing international guidelines for the recycling and disposal of electronic scrap.

There are currently no international standards in place, and Cassel says that can cause problems.

“There are risks that New York and other states face for electronics collected from these programs going overseas to countries where their environmental and social laws are not the same standards as the United States. And this can cause pollution of waterways and land, and it can also impact the health of workers, and many times unfortunately this is children.”

Cassel says there’s a federal bill in the works that aims to rectify this and create at least some national standards.

But as it stands, the onus is currently on manufacturers and recycling operations to dispose of e-waste safely.

One such operation, upstate electronics recycling company [SunKing](#), has thrived in this new environment.

Company spokesman Zach Hussian says business has doubled annually since the recycling legislation kicked in, and there is now growing awareness within communities, and more convenient disposal options for consumers.

The addition of the legislation has done a few things. It’s raised awareness as far as from a residential perspective and even a lot of businesses, that this stuff cannot end up in a land fill because of the harmful materials that these electronics do contain but also just because of all the recyclable metals and plastics and glass and precious metals that it would be a shame to also throw those in the landfill. So, what we’re doing is we’re really starting to grow our network of collection sites throughout the region,” he says.

But, with a seemingly never ending stream of outdated electronic waste, Hussian agrees with PSI founder Scott Cassel. He says international standards are sorely needed.

“It’s already become a problem. I mean, for decades this type of material has been making its way to the waste stream, has not always been handled the most responsibly, but I think as people become more aware of the dangers of improperly handling this material it’s going to get better.”

“The legislation here in the United States on a statewide level has certainly helped to raise the awareness and raise the amount of tonnage that’s coming in and being recycled.”

But, Hussian says the current legislation doesn’t have any impact on exportation of e-waste, even if it’s being done irresponsibly.

“From an international perspective there’s no legislation that really prevents or monitors the way that this material is being traded. There’s also no legislation even on a national level in the United States for how this works. There’s no federal legislation that really steers anybody in one given direction so there’s a lot of work that needs to be done on the federal level, and then obviously from the international perspective on how this material is being handled.”

Hussian says the recycling industry needs to keep track of product development so it can respond to changing materials and quantities.

He says national and international standards would go a long way to helping the industry monitor e-waste and minimize potential hazards.



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