

TRASH RULES



JULIA MALAYE PHOTOS / LOWELL SUN

From left, UTEC Young Adults Abisrael Jimenez, 22, of Lawrence, Ava Murray, 17, of North Andover, and Gabriella Sylvester, 21, of Andover, take apart a mattress at UTEC's mattress recycling operation in Lawrence. Mattress recycling becomes mandatory in Massachusetts later this year to reduce solid waste.

RECYCLING INDUSTRY OPPORTUNITIES

By **Melanie Gilbert**
mgilbert@lowellsun.com

LOWELL • A new statewide ban on the disposal of mattresses and box springs via the waste stream or incinerators takes effect Nov. 1, and UTEC is readying for the shift.

The nonprofit serving justice-involved young adults, which runs a mattress recycling enterprise in Lawrence, is working with state Sen. Ed Kennedy

to manage the potential implications for its community-based business model.

Kennedy's legislation — which needs to pass by Sunday, the end of the legislative session — includes a provision for an advisory committee made up of recyclers at which nonprofits will have a seat at the table providing oversight. More importantly, the bill places an emphasis on supporting nonprofit social enterprises in the new industry.

"I filed legislation at the beginning of the session, which would have been early last year," Kennedy said by phone this week. "California, Oregon, Rhode Island and Connecticut all have this mattress landfill ban. What makes our legislation unique is that we have some consideration for the private nonprofits that provide jobs for young people who are looking to get back on track."

Massachusetts residents and

businesses discard more than 600,000 mattresses and box springs annually. UTEC handles almost 25,000 of that total but is expanding both its warehouse footprint and staffing capability to meet the increased demand driven by the new regulation established by the state Department of Environmental Protection in its 2023 Solid Waste Master Plan. The bulky items, which clog landfills and lead to higher

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Mattresses

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disposal costs for towns and cities, are almost 95% recyclable.

"The bill provides jobs for these young people," Kennedy said. "That part of it is a big deal. It would make sure that places like UTEC continue to operate."

UTEC CEO Gregg Croteau has been with the organization from the beginning — more than 20 years — and he says competition from better-funded and larger companies could jeopardize the unique services they provide to young people in the community who face complex barriers to employment.

"This ban opens up a new industry in the state," Croteau said Wednesday at the Lawrence-based warehouse. "There may be much larger businesses from out-of-state that can scale up. And, honestly, without this bill, we could be out of business pretty quickly."

A forklift driven by Anna Lucia, who trained at UTEC and has been with the organization for three years, beeped in the background as the Lawrence resident swiftly unloaded a trailer filled with 300 mattresses picked up from Harvard University, one of the organization's clients. The city of Lowell was one of UTEC's first municipal contracts.

Croteau and his team have been working with Kennedy to protect and grow the niche they have carved out in the mattress recycling industry, serving at-risk youth in the Merrimack Valley.

"Sen. Kennedy's bill stands out nationally because it has an emphasis on supporting nonprofit social enterprises in this brand-new industry," Croteau said. "The senator has been a great supporter of UTEC for a number of years."

The sprawling warehouse will be vacated mid-August

when UTEC moves a couple miles up the road to a larger facility that will double its square footage and expand its young adult programming.

"We serve about 140 young people intensively over the course of a year at all different stages in their life-work process," Croteau said.

Ava Murray, of North Andover, and Diego Paralta, of Haverhill, are newly minted graduates of UTEC's Transformational Beginnings Program, which acclimates participants to the expectations of a workplace and teaches social-emotional focus and team-building skills.

The work experience component starts on the shop-room floor with participants learning to disassemble the mattresses into recyclable components. From there, they can move their apprenticeship into other such areas as wood-working and culinary arts.

"I found out about UTEC through my lawyer," Murray said between stripping a mattress of its foam padding. "I didn't want to finish up school, and this is a better alternative for me. I like the program. I like keeping busy. I'm back on a routine. I'm working almost every day 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. And I'm making money."

Her team leader is Vic Jamina, of Lowell, who runs the Transformational Beginnings workshops and the mattress recycling program.

"This group I have now is on the fast track because they've showed up every day for the last two weeks," Jamina said. "With this group of young people, we can recycle about 60 mattresses a day. The basics of the program is getting your body up, showing them the work of being on time and how to communicate with your manager. Those are the first steps to holding a job."

Paralta says the work is tiring, but he likes the en-



JULIA MILAKI PHOTO/LOWELL SUN

UTEC Young Adults Abismael Jimenez, 22, of Lawrence, left, and Diego Paralta, 17, of Haverhill, also below, take apart a mattress at UTEC's mattress recycling operation in Lawrence.

ergy of his teammates to keep him engaged in the work and the program.

"At first, I didn't know what to do, but once Vic taught me, I was getting it done quick," he said. "I've got good people with good energy around me so it keeps me going, keeps me motivated. And there are a lot of kids my age, so seeing them working, I kind of get into a flow."

The looming ban has galvanized municipalities to contract with existing mattress recycling companies, said Senior Director of Social Enterprises Ricardo Febles.

The Dracut resident said that in January, his phone started "ringing off the hook" with municipalities from Springfield to the very northeast corner of Massachusetts.

But despite expanding their physical footprint and beefing up their staffing capabilities, Febles said that "we have decided that our priority is to invest back into the Merrimack Valley given our program and where we're located."

It's a calculated risk, said Croteau, but a necessary one given the community they serve. Passing Kennedy's legislation would help them maintain and continue to grow a successful program with community roots.

"The bill provides stewardship legislation. We're excited about the future of mattress recycling and Sen. Kennedy's bill," Croteau said. "We'll be recycling more mattresses, which



will enable us to work with more young adults to have that kind of meaningful on-the-job experience. This legislation supports a new industry but connects it with existing community. It's really a one-of-a-kind piece of legislation."



UTEC Young Adults Ava Murray, 17, of North Andover, left, and Gabriella Sylvestre, 21, of Andover, take apart a mattress.