



## Towns needed mattress recycling. Young adults leaving prison needed jobs. This nonprofit stepped in.

|| LISTEN • 8:25

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

SHARE   



*Young adults Anthony Gonzales, left, and Zaequwan Rodriguez, right, deconstructing a mattress as part of the local nonprofit United Teen Equity Center's mattress recycling program.*

**By April Kana Ruhalter and Saraya Wintersmith**

**April 29, 2025**

It's Earth Month, and here on the Joy Beat, GBH's All Things Considered is celebrating a story about sustainable transformation — of the planet and of people.

When Massachusetts banned throwing out mattresses three years ago, a local nonprofit United Teen Equity Center — or UTEC — saw a unique opportunity for its young members. UTEC teaches young people who are “justice-involved” life skills like woodworking to help keep them out of prison.

Now, it has its environmentally conscious mattress recycling program, too. In just one year, since Earth Day of 2024, the program has recycled nearly 50,000 mattresses and box springs in 36 Massachusetts cities and towns.

Ricardo Febles, UTEC’s chief social enterprise officer, joined GBH’s All Things Considered guest host Saraya Wintersmith to share more about the program’s success. What follows is a lightly edited transcript.

Saraya Wintersmith: Right away, let’s get to what I presume is your joy. Tell us, how does it feel to see young people at work helping the environment?

Ricardo Febles: Absolutely. You know, one of our organizational values is to spark sustainability here at UTEC. That has multiple meanings when you consider mattress recycling or social enterprise in general.

Obviously, we’re sparking sustainability for the environment by reducing the solid waste and carbon emissions that come from that, but we’re also supporting sustainability for young people by providing employment, meaningful job training, social support and social-emotional skill development that will carry them through their adult years.

Wintersmith: Ricardo, nearly 50,000 mattresses is a crazy number. What kind of environmental impact does that represent?

Febles: Mattresses are one of the most harmful environmental challenges, which is why they were banned. They don’t biodegrade; they don’t break down; they clog up landfills.

By doing the work that we do, we’re recycling an average of 88% of every mattress and box spring that we touch. That means that only that 12% — condensed in a much more biodegradable format — is going back into the solid waste stream, with the vast majority of the [mattress] going to repurposed, reused alternative sources. So it’s, needless to say, a tremendous environmental impact.

Wintersmith: Walk us through the process of what happens when a mattress arrives in your care.

Febles: Absolutely. So, from the time that we steward a mattress into our facility, which we’ve already picked up, we will manually separate the mattresses. And we’re talking about a box cutter — taking off the external layer of fabric and the pillow top.

We’ll separate the foam within; we separate the cotton within; we will separate the metal springs; and we will salvage almost all of those layers, provided that they aren’t excessively soiled.

The pillow tops condensed; they go to one after-market. The foam is condensed; it goes to another after-market. The steel is condensed; it goes to another after-market. The wood from box springs is also salvaged and condensed. So, really, that very outer layer of a mattress that touches skin, that's not the pillow top itself, is what ends up back in solid waste.

Wintersmith: We said at the top that you're doing that work across three dozen municipalities in Massachusetts. That's a significant partnership. Talk about how that collaboration came to be, and how important it is to the success of your program that you're working across the state.

Febles: Absolutely. We are a community organization, and so naturally leaning into communities is built into our DNA, right?

Our mattress curbside collection program started with the city of Lowell and expanded to Chelmsford and a couple of other communities. Cambridge was a big one that came to us through our community networks.

When the waste ban happened, a lot of new recyclers came into the industry, but nobody was really focused on the Merrimack Valley, which is our part of the commonwealth.

We made the decision to lean into growth. We actually scaled our business more than 100% — added capital equipment, added human resources, and added slots for young people to be able to answer the call of this waste ban for our local communities.

Really, we've grown with the goal of being the preferred recycler for the Merrimack Valley with a couple of peripheral municipalities that have just heard about our program — the excellent work we're doing — and want to be supportive.

But really, we wanna take care of our local communities, as they're the ones that disproportionately house and impact the community that we serve as an organization.

Wintersmith: One of the things that makes your program really inspiring and unique is that it ties green jobs to the youth opportunity. Can you talk about how UTEC supports young adults?

Febles: Absolutely. Just a little background — UTEC was founded in 1999 in response to rising gang violence in the city of Lowell. Since then — and that's well over 25 years now — UTEC has grown into a nationally recognized organization offering wraparound supports, workforce development and education for our young people involved in the justice system. Our goal is to empower young adults to overcome systemic barriers, break the cycle of violence and achieve personal and community transformation.

That having been said, the beauty of social enterprises is they've been proven to have a direct community impact. They give our young people who are often justice-involved, which means they've

caught a case or they're involved in the criminal justice system, incarcerated at times, or they're otherwise disconnected or gang-involved within our community.

Our social enterprises and our program exist to give a new purpose towards what it means to be part of our community. Our social enterprises, such as mattress recycling, provide that community impact; they give our young adults a clean slate to show up as they are, where they are, and to gain work experience in a safe space.

You know, it's been proven that every dollar invested into a social enterprise creates \$2.25 in social capital and social returns for the young people we serve. Our social enterprises, such as mattress recycling, provide that community impact; they give our young adults a clean slate to show up as they are.

Wintersmith: That's amazing, and I think that gets to this last thing I want to ask you: The numbers are one thing, but I'm sure that you see all kinds of stories that are personal or transformative. Is there a moment that comes to mind, or a story that sticks with you that reaffirms why you do what you do?

Febles: Too many to count, if I'm honest. One that more recently comes to mind is one of UTEC's many programs that take place in incarceration facilities — specifically, a unit called the B.R.A.V.E. Unit. We have our reentry team go into that facility weekly, work with the young people there and help them in their transition to reentry.

Recently, in partnership with our reentry team, we've been able to open slots at mattress recycling for these young people immediately leaving incarceration to have a landing spot, income and a job. That's been a pilot for us in recent months. I'm very excited that we recently were able to hire a full-time staff position — one of those reentering young people who came in — who hit the ground running and just did a fantastic job.

In terms of our value of sparking sustainability, that is a shining example of how well it can work. You take someone from an environment where they might not have access to many resources. Provide the opportunity, they do all the excellent work that they do on themselves behind the wall.

And then coming out [of incarceration], do the work physically in mattress recycling, and we're able to reward that with a longer-term opportunity.

That's what it's all about for me.