

# THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

OPINION

## Providing Clothing to Families Facing Poverty Should Be More Than a Funding Accessory

By *Deborah Blatt*

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The Sharing Shelf uses volunteers to screen clothing donations for quality and then distributes them to low-income children and teens through nonprofits. Some of the recipients have heartbreaking stories.

During a crisis, philanthropic and government funding rightfully targets the most extreme and obvious needs — hunger, homelessness, and, in the case of the pandemic, medical care. Clothing for struggling families is unlikely to even make the list.

But clothing insecurity, or the lack of sufficient, clean, seasonal, and size-appropriate apparel, is a much more serious problem than many people understand. If an individual or a family can't pay the rent or afford to put food on the table, basics like underwear, socks, and shoes become luxuries.

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Clothing insecurity is worsening now, in part because some clothing distribution and collection organizations [curtailed operations](#) due to fears that Covid-19 could spread through used apparel. Staff were also forced to work remotely, and the volunteers critical to their operations were hesitant to assist. Food pantries and other small programs that might have provided clothes cut back on clothing distribution to focus on the enormous need for food.

Clothing insecurity, admittedly, is not as immediate a problem as food insecurity and homelessness. Someone who loses a job also loses income to purchase food or pay rent but may still have clothing in the closet. But for low-income people who are consistently and persistently cash-strapped, especially those with growing children, clothing insecurity is an immediate need. It is the difference between clean and dirty underwear — or no underwear at all. It means that the jeans, coats, or shirts from a month ago are now too small on a sprouting child.

I run a nonprofit clothing bank called the [Sharing Shelf](#) in Westchester County, N.Y. We operate a warehouse where we collect new and gently used clothes, tap volunteers who screen it for quality, and then distribute it for free to low-income children and teens through nonprofits such as social-service agencies, schools, and food pantries. We hear heartbreaking stories on a regular basis. A child who wore a suit to school every day because that was his only outfit. Siblings whose only shoes were Crocs during a New York winter. A teen who appeared at a homeless shelter with just the clothes on his back. A 2-year-old boy wearing an adult's dirty red sweatshirt.

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Children are more likely to miss school when they [don't have proper clothing](#), pushing them further behind their peers. When they do attend school, they are often bullied, causing their self-esteem to plummet. They are more likely to drop out of high school, continuing along a cyclical path of poverty that is repeated with their own children. The problem disproportionately affects families and children of color.

### **Change the Used Clothing System**

Fortunately, unlike many of our nation's most complex problems, this one is relatively easy to fix. First, we need to overhaul a used-clothing distribution system that treats secondhand clothing as a commodity to raise funds for charities rather than a means to address poverty. Second, philanthropy needs to step up its game. In my 11 plus years of experience in the field, I have yet to find a grant earmarked to provide clothing to a child in need.

Used clothing in this country typically follows a path away from those who actually need free clothes. Here's how it works: After Americans clean their closets and drawers, they head to the local used-clothing parking-lot bin or they call a nonprofit to pick up their giveaways. Those bins and trucks often have a charitable name, which gives people the impression that donated items miraculously flow to people in need.

The reality is that the large, well-recognized nonprofits that dominate the used-clothing field, such as the [Salvation Army and Goodwill](#), sell donated apparel to fund their charitable work, which, ironically, doesn't involve clothing poor people. Rather than distributing the clothing, they sell it through their stores. The Salvation Army does have a voucher system that allows people to apply for free clothes, but it isn't well known or widely used.

The same pattern applies to more regional operations or those targeted to a particular group. These nonprofits contract with a third party, usually a textile grader — a company that owns and sells the clothing. No veteran, for instance, receives free clothing from the [Vietnam Veterans of America](#) pick-up. GreenDrop, which has locations along the East Coast, accepts clothing ostensibly on behalf of a few charities, but those items never reach families directly. The [GreenDrop website](#) says it supports the fundraising efforts of its charitable partners “through the generation and collection of donated clothing and household items,” which are then sold to various thrift stores.

Clothing banks like mine and others scattered throughout the country, such as [Cradles to Crayons](#), with locations in Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia, and [WestSide Baby](#) in Seattle, take a much different approach. We operate like food banks, accepting, processing, and then redistributing clothing donations to low-income people. We rely on well-screened secondhand clothing, unused leftover items from the apparel industry, and new clothes. During and in the aftermath of the pandemic, many of us have been busier than ever, facing the challenge of increased demand combined with a heightened need for other basic items such as diapers and toiletries, which aren't offered by food banks.

Federal, state, and local governments need to offer clothing assistance in the same way they provide funding for hunger relief and shelter. And philanthropy needs to recognize that tackling clothing insecurity is a problem worthy of their attention. I scour grant databases on a regular basis, trying to figure out how to maneuver our mission into popular foundation program areas such as social justice, the environment, empowerment, education, and enrichment. But it's almost always a futile task.

## Operating Costs Make Change Happen

Part of the challenge is in how philanthropic organizations categorize the expenses of nonprofits like clothing banks. The Sharing Shelf, for instance, rents a warehouse and hires staff, which in turn taps hundreds of volunteers to convert tens of thousands of new and gently used items into a usable product. We link people in the community with specific projects, such as charitable drives for diapers, socks, and underwear. We meet the basic material needs of thousands of children each year and we provide a meaningful way to engage the local community. But our primary expenses (rent and salaries) are viewed by grant makers as operational, rather than programmatic, which they are loath to support.

Providing a child or adult with quality, secondhand clothing will not cure their economic woes, but it can improve someone's chances in a job interview, increase the likelihood a child will stay in school, and boost self-esteem. Addressing clothing insecurity should be part of any philanthropic mission to fight poverty and ensure all children in this country are prepared to lead full and productive lives.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

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[Deborah Blatt](#)

Deborah Blatt is the director and founder of The Sharing Shelf.

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