

## Suit Donations Help Poor, Homeless

By Nicholas Beadle

June 22, 2006

(AXcess News) Washington - Michael O'Rourke knows he is one bad decision from spending the rest of his life in a California prison. The 48-year-old can say, without hesitation, that he had scraped bottom in 1986 when he looked at his 6-year-old son after telling him they had to sleep in a park because no apartment would rent to him anymore.

But he can also tell you that, years later, someone gave him three dress suits to wear to a job interview so he would not have to wear clothes so old they dissolved in the rinse cycle.

That pulled him out of the bottomless pit of crime - California's three-strike law loomed - busted credit and lost loved ones that a spoonful of cocaine pushed him into a quarter century ago.

Now an instructor at the Turnkey Construction Management Institute in Los Angeles, O'Rourke told his story at the Capitol Pursuit Drive Wednesday. Sponsored by the American League of Lobbyists and Men's Wearhouse, the event collects "gently-worn" suits from workers on Capitol Hill - lobbyists, members of Congress and staff - for groups that give those outfits to homeless and indigent men and women who need something smart to wear to get a meaningful job.

"It's not a handout, it's a hand up," said lobbyist Dave Wenhold, who helped organize the first drive three years ago.

Wenhold said the idea of donating old, outgrown or outmoded suits just seemed like it would click in Washington, a town where men and women in business and politics have closets full of nice clothing they no longer wear.

His hunch paid off. The first two drives took in 13,000 suits. Wednesday's event tacked on an additional 10,562 outfits, crowding the Rayburn House Office Building foyer with racks upon racks of suits and cardboard boxes loaded with a tightly-packed spectrum of neckties.

Ninety percent of the donated suits will be dispersed in the D.C. community, Wenhold said.

Nice clothing did not glue O'Rourke's life back together, but it certainly helped, he said. A center for homeless veterans helped him get the classes he needed to teach construction management 18 months ago, but he said he would never have gotten his job without the suits given to him by the Working Wardrobes charity.

His children - his son is now 26 and a daughter is 19 - lived with their mother while he was periodically homeless or in jail. He has begun to spend time with his daughter again.

O'Rourke said he will soon have enough money to buy a car so he can help Working Wardrobes. He said he still remembers the day he warily slid into a black suit and was shocked when he looked in the mirror.

"I looked like a completely different person," he said. "I'll frame it on the wall one day."