

Charity helps others find clothes

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Dave Wenhold says that clothes don't make the man, but they do help.

With that thought in mind, Wenhold, a Dale City resident who works as a lobbyist on Capitol Hill, and Laura Dennis, an associate of his at Miller/Wenhold Capitol Strategies of Fairfax, founded the Capitol PurSuit Drive three years ago.

The annual drive collects suits for men and women who are trying to re-enter the workforce to wear on interviews.

"It's really kind of amazing what a difference a suit makes," said Wenhold, 38. "When you're giving someone a suit, you're really giving them opportunity and hope for the future."

Suits collected in the annual drive are given to local and national charities that help people looking to transition back into the workforce after unemployment.

Having a good suit is an important first step in that process, said Gary Field, the founder of New York-based Career Gear, a national organization that benefits from the Capitol PurSuit drive.

"Studies indicate that a decision is made within the first eight seconds of the interview," Field said. "If you give someone a good suit to wear to an interview, they're not going to be immediately bounced out."

Wenhold got the idea for starting a suit drive on Capitol Hill a few years ago, at a time when he and other lobbyists were brainstorming ways to help people to get back into the workforce, he said.

"I thought this was something tangible that we could do. As lobbyists we always talk about helping people, but it's usually not real tangible things. People don't see the immediate impact of what members of Congress and lobbyists do," he said.

Wenhold got the American League of Lobbyists, of which he is a vice president, and Men's Wearhouse in on the project.

Men's Wearhouse had been conducting similar, smaller drives in other areas of the country, but none in the Washington, D.C., area, said Cynthia Stewart, Director of Corporate Giving for Men's Wearhouse.

"[Wenhold] contacted me and said 'Maybe you should do this on Capitol Hill,'" Stewart said.

The idea just made sense, Stewart said.

Many of the lobbyists, Congressmen, and others who work in and around Capitol Hill and the White House have plenty of perfectly good used suits to spare, Wenhold said.

And the Capitol Hill location gives the charities that collect and distribute suits year-round the opportunity to spread awareness of their causes and work to the country's decision-makers, Stewart said.

"It helps us to collect clothes for our clients, but also to get our name out there and to raise awareness for our mission," Field said.

The drive benefits those who donate the suits too, Wenhold said.

"This is a good opportunity for us to highlight the positives of lobbying and the positives of Washington," he said. "It's just a good way for people to see the good side of what we do."

And people have noticed the good work. Wenhold and Collins both received the President's Call to Service Award for their work on the drive.

And interest in the drive is always growing, he said.

"The first year ... we thought we'd consider this really successful if we got 2,000 suits," Wenhold said.

They got 7,000 that year.

This year's drive was held June 21 and collected a record of 10,562 suits, shirts, belts and shoes.

This year, for the first time, some suits will also be making their way back to Prince William County and will be distributed through the county's Department of Social Services, Wenhold said.

Next year, he hopes to make even more of a local impact, he said.

"This year a few hundred suits are coming back [to Prince William County]. I hope to bring back thousands next year," Wenhold said.

Wenhold said he anticipates the suit drive getting even bigger in future years.

"Every year it gets bigger and bigger. I don't ever see this stopping or slowing down," Wenhold said.

Anyone interested in helping with next year's collection drive can e-mail Dave Wenhold at dwenhold@mwcapitol.com.