

# NEWS

## **Suit drive smashes its record**

*By [Jeff Dufour](#)*

The casual observer yesterday could be forgiven for thinking the Rayburn foyer had been taken over by a dry-cleaning business.

Rack after rolling rack held row after row of suits, shirts and other business attire, all neatly hung and wrapped in clear plastic. And all day, staffers, lobbyists and other denizens of Capitol Hill carted in more and more suits.

But the suits didn't need cleaning and pressing. They were in good shape and were destined for trucks, charities and, ultimately, new owners.

Yesterday's event marked the third iteration of the Capitol PurSuit Drive, an effort to get "gently used" suits to men and women who are re-entering the work force.

After collecting 13,000 suits and other articles of business clothing in total over the past two years, yesterday's event surpassed all expectations, collecting 10,562 items.

Dave Wenhold, a partner with Miller Wenhold Capitol Strategies, said he had "no idea that it would be this big" when he conceived the event more than three years ago.

For Wenhold, it was a matter of matching up the surplus of high-quality suits in the closets of members, staffers and lobbyists with the tremendous need for business clothing among Washington's underprivileged.

He initially tapped into the lobbying community through his position with the American League of Lobbyists and forged a relationship with retailer Men's Wearhouse for logistical and publicity support. The Hill newspaper was the charity's media sponsor this year.

Reps. Ron Kind (D-Wis.), Wally Herger (R-Calif.) and Mark Foley (R-Fla.) appeared at the noon press conference, suits in tow.

"What is happening here today is providing people with the chance to improve their first impression," said Foley, whose dapper duds nearly always make a solid first impression.

Not all of the suits were collected today. Rather, lobbyists, committee

staffs and even the White House engaged in suit drives ahead of time to add to the overall number — and improve logistics.

Mike Fulton, executive vice president of Golin Harris, who has been intimately involved with the event, said that in the past they'd bring their whole haul to Rayburn that day. "Now we've gotten smarter" in collecting ahead of time, he said.

His firm collected 292 suits in its building and Arlington neighborhood, thanks to a variety of incentives he employed. That put the firm atop the lobbying firms competing to be "most suitable," in Wenhold's term, ahead of Patton Boggs, with 273, and Bracewell & Giuliani, with 238.

Congressional committee staffs had a competition of their own, with the House Education and the Workforce Committee coming out on top. That staff collected 116 items of clothing.

Even the White House got in on the act. As of Tuesday, White House staffers donated nearly 400 pieces of work wear.

Not just suits came through, either. Donors dropped off belts, shirts, even shoes.

"A lot of the dress shirts that are donated, I don't think that I'd ever want to put one on," said Cynthia Stewart of Men's Wearhouse. "They're what's between the suit and the body." So this year the company is also contributing one dress shirt to the charities for every suit donated.

From Rayburn, the suits etc. will go to national and local organizations such as Working Wardrobes, Suited for Change and Gospel Rescue Ministries. For the most part, the suits will stay in D.C.

Evita Grigsby, the new executive director of Suited for Change, explained that "companies that provide training and placement refer clients to us when they get [a job] interview."

A "one-on-one confidential session" ensues, during which clients are briefed on presenting themselves professionally and given two complete business outfits.

If they are hired, the charity gives them three more outfits, for a week's worth of clothing.

Jerri Rosen of Working Wardrobes said yesterday's event "helps our programs by raising access to congressional representatives."

In addition, she said, her organization is looking to host a drive in

Sacramento, Calif., modeled on the Capitol PurSuit Drive.