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Goodwill Industries: A Community Partner for Eastern Nebraska and Southwest Iowa

By Kara Schweiss | Photography By Debra S. Kaplan

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Tobi Mathouser, president and CEO of Goodwill Inc. serving Eastern Nebraska and Southwest Iowa.

Debra S. Kaplan

Goodwill Industries: A Community Partner for Eastern Nebraska and Southwest Iowa



Goodwill recently opened an Elkhorn location at 18905 Evans St.

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The Goodwill name is well-recognized in the community, as it is all over the country, said Tobi Mathouser, president and CEO of Goodwill Industries Inc. serving Eastern Nebraska and Southwest Iowa. Most people, however, are not familiar with the entire spectrum of services provided by the organization.





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“It’s no secret that most people know us for our retail stores, to donate items,” she said. “But obviously there’s a very important story behind those stores, and it is the most important thing that I want everyone to know about Goodwill. The revenue from those sales and those donated items goes to support our workforce readiness programs.”

These services, which are free, include job readiness classes and short-term training programs. Plus, they’re available to anyone who needs them, Mathouser said.

“Over the last four years, the sales that have been generated from our amazing and loyal [retail store] customers have allowed us to contribute about \$9 million towards the operations of these workforce readiness programs,” Mathouser said.

“The majority of individuals that come through our doors are those who are unemployed or underemployed and experiencing some kind of barrier to finding success in the workforce.”

Community based



Goodwill Industries of Eastern Nebraska and Southwest Iowa is one of more than 150 Goodwill chapters in the United States and Canada. Each chapter can modify its services to meet an individual region's or community's needs.

"We all operate independently. We all truly do share the mission to provide localized workforce development programs that help individuals who are unemployed and underemployed enhance their skills and find careers within their community," Mathouser said.

"The biggest difference from Goodwill to Goodwill is really the communities in which they're located, and those communities that they serve. The needs of each community are different, and it depends on other organizations and the services that they provide, the experience that each Goodwill holds and the historical services that they have provided to those communities. We're all community-based organizations, so it's really important for us to listen to the needs of each individual community, and that changes from chapter to chapter."

That really hasn't changed that much over 90 years. We're still taking items that are donated to us and doing the most good with those items.

- TOBI MATHOUSER, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF GOODWILL INDUSTRIES INC. SERVING EASTERN NEBRASKA AND SOUTHWEST IOWA

For example, some Goodwill chapters focus on providing day services to people with significant disabilities, Mathouser explained.

The local chapter focuses on job readiness, but still offers services for individuals with disabilities from an employment perspective through its AbilityOne program.

With the support of federal government partners — the Federal Buildings in Omaha and Lincoln as well as U.S. Strategic Command and Offutt Air Force Base in Bellevue — AbilityOne positions provide the opportunity for part-time employees to build skills and ensure successful, long-term job placement.

Participants are paid according to the federal wage determination, which starts at more than \$17 an hour.

Relevant skills



Goodwill Employment Partners are companies across the Omaha metro area that help place Goodwill Works program participants, which include people with disabilities as well as people experiencing other barriers to employment, in long-term jobs.

Goodwill Works is open to any job-seeker or anyone whose objective is to learn new skills or change careers. Other programs, like AbilityOne, YouthBuild AmeriCorps and Work Experience, do have eligibility requirements.

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In addition to job training, local programs may include apprenticeships, placement assistance, and referral resources.

One newer offering is a free, two-week CNA training course covering essential skills for patient care. In 2024, donor support made it possible for those participants to earn an hourly wage during training.

YouthBuild AmeriCorps prepares youth for the construction trades, combining classroom instruction and on-the-job training. The program also helps young people earn a high school diploma or equivalency degree and prepare for post-secondary opportunities.

Accessible training

In the last two years, access to these services and others has become easier thanks to three new training center locations. The original training center on North 72nd Street in Omaha is now joined by the 36th and L streets and 45th and Nicholas streets locations in Omaha, and the Charles E. Lakin Human Services campus in Council Bluffs.

Training space is also slated for the newest Goodwill facility, which opened in Elkhorn in October and also houses retail and donation drop-offs in its 15,000 square feet.

“An individual can go to any one of those locations, and they are not going to be turned away. We’re going to find out with them what their needs are, what they’re struggling with, and where the best place is for them to get services and resources for whatever they’re experiencing,” Mathouser said.

“It could be with Goodwill, but it may also be another nonprofit in the community that is doing great things and might be able to serve this person better. We partner with so many businesses and so many nonprofit organizations... we make sure that someone who walks through our door is going to get connected to the services that they need.”

Meeting needs

The chapter has continued to evolve with the changing times, expanding its e-commerce operations to allow for more online shopping. In January it also launched a new initiative called WillPower.

I think that’s an opportunity for the business community to get involved with Goodwill and help us be the best that we can be for the people that we serve and the community and the business community we serve.

- TOBI MATHOUSER, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF GOODWILL INDUSTRIES INC. SERVING EASTERN NEBRASKA AND SOUTHWEST IOWA

“This initiative really focuses on making sure that our 750 employees are receiving or have access to the same types of workforce readiness services that we’re offering to the community,” Mathouser said.

“That has been an amazing program that makes our employees feel welcome, taken care of, engaged in the organization... We’ve been [serving] the community for so long, and in 2024 we just got really intentional about making sure our employees know about the programs we offer and the services that are also available to them.”

More new offerings are ahead, including expanded health care certifications, “because the community told us that that’s what they needed.”

History of commitment

Goodwill’s retail centers are located in communities all over the country and are probably still the most visible and longstanding facet of the local chapter, Mathouser said.

“When Goodwill was established in 1933, really what we were doing was repairing items that were donated to Goodwill, and many of the programs were provided to individuals who were down and out, who needed a hand up. That really hasn’t changed that much over 90 years. We’re still taking items that are donated to us

and doing the most good with those items,” Mathouser said.

Today, that includes targeted retail via three specialty shops: GoodBytes (computers and other electronics and accessories), e-commerce

(shopgoodwill.com), and the Retail Outlet Store where items are sold by the pound before reaching the end of their usefulness.

Unsold or unsellable items can usually be recycled, a service of growing importance as Americans become more attuned to sustainability issues and environmental awareness.

“In 2023 we recycled 8.75 million pounds of items. That includes clothing, belts, purses, shoes that don’t sell in our stores. It includes electronics that don’t sell in our stores,” Mathouser said.

In search of: partners

Next year promises to be a period of solidity for the organization following two years of significant growth, Mathouser said.

“The biggest thing for 2025 is to just make sure that we are continuing to provide the best service in our existing retail stores, to make sure that we are keeping our customers happy and our donors happy, so that we can continue to put those dollars towards our mission and programming going forward,” Mathouser said.

She added that local employers are key to sustaining Goodwill’s local workforce programs.

“We need their help in telling us what they’re looking for in an employee, to partner with us so that we can customize the training programs, the job readiness services that we’re providing to the community — so that we’re meeting not only the participants that we’re serving, but also the business community that we’re serving,” she explained.

“I would invite businesses to reach out to us and tell us how we can best support them. We do a really good job of asking the program participants what they’re looking for and what their needs are. I really want to focus on the business community and making sure that we are a good partner.”

The local chapter also has a business advisory board that Mathouser said employers can join.

Goodwill has had a presence in the Omaha metro area since 1933. The chapter was the recipient of the Better Business Bureau Torch Award for Ethics and the Greater Omaha Chamber Award for Business Excellence this year.

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