



SURE WE CAN

WHERE EVERYONE COUNTS

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My name is Ryan Castalia. I'm Executive Director of Sure We Can, a Brooklyn-based redemption center and nonprofit serving independent recyclers. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today! A person only needs to glance at the news or look outside to understand the vast scope of the waste problem we face, and the steep responsibility the state has in ensuring the safety, well-being, and success of its people in the daunting months to come. Urgent action needs to be taken to keep our communities from being buried underneath the overwhelming burdens of pollution and climate change, and that hard-fought and successful environmental and economic policy isn't lost because of regressive and short-term thinking. The consequences of inaction are evident—New Yorkers are in real danger of losing their lives or livelihoods. Small businesses and independent workers across the city are abandoning the work of the circular economy because their income, controlled by the law, is simply insufficient. One might think that this incredible urgency would translate into swift action, yet Kathy Hochul failed to even mention solid waste in the State of the State, or propose any meaningful initiatives around this critical issue in her budget. New York struggles to support even the simplest, most effective, and longest-standing recycling system in our state—the Bottle Bill—and the workers who drive its success.

The Bottle Bill works, period. It's demonstrated its efficacy continuously for decades, resulting in the diversion of millions of tons of waste and vast reductions in litter in our communities. It's the most effective recycling system we have, resulting in the diversion of millions of tons of waste and vast reductions in litter in our communities without cost to the state—in fact, it generates revenue through unclaimed deposits. Today it captures around 70% of the material it covers. It supports small businesses and drives the circular economy. It's even become a mechanism for environmental justice, creating a low-barrier way for marginalized people from all kinds of backgrounds to become independent recyclers who work, contribute to their communities, and earn a livelihood. Professional canners are invested in their communities, and return to the same places—for this reason, they do not tend to leave a mess when they gather materials. I know recyclers who have sent their children to college, one bottle or can at a time. Our redemption center, just in one part of Brooklyn, diverts approximately 1 million bottles and cans each month, and distributes hundreds of thousands of dollars annually in income into underserved communities. In a very basic way, this system makes our city cleaner and stronger.

All of this is hopelessly out of sync with the neglect the system has suffered. The bottle deposit of 5c hasn't risen for over 40 years. That means that participation in the system is not properly

incentivized, resulting in a lower return rate and poorer recycling outcomes. It also means the tireless workers who pick up the bottles and cans that others throw away haven't gotten a raise in decades. Today in New York City, canners earn on average \$5/hour¹, or less than a third of minimum wage. The handling fee that supports redemption centers hasn't risen for 16 years, while the cost of operating a business has risen drastically. Redemption centers are closing every day because it's too expensive to operate—small businesses providing essential services are collapsing, and making the system at large harder to access for everyone. Vague and unenforced regulation has made accountability between redemption centers and distributors almost impossible. Finally, many types of containers are arbitrarily excluded from the system, creating needless confusion and inconsistency, not to mention increasing litter. Coca-Cola can sell a tea beverage and a soda beverage in the exact same container—same size, same shape, same material—and the soda is redeemable but the tea is not. It simply doesn't make sense. All this combines to hamper the system's efficacy, put more trash on the streets, depress small businesses, and keep independent recycling entrepreneurs trapped on the margins. These consequences are visible across the state, but are particularly dire here in the city.

After years of kicking the can down the road, the system has reached the brink of collapse. Redemption centers are disappearing, making it harder than ever to return materials. Marginalized canners are being further marginalized, and our streets, landfills, and waterways are filling with beverage containers, new and old, that aren't included in the system. The first step to a better situation is the city must wholeheartedly support the state's expansion of the Bottle Bill. With three simple updates, an already-working system could reach new heights. A 10c deposit would push our return rates, now at under 70%, up to 90%, as other states have seen. It would mean more income for independent recyclers and more revenue for the state from unredeemed deposits. An increased handling fee would allow redemption centers to flourish instead of suffer, creating new access points and driving local economic activity. More containers included would mean a drastic increase in the volume of material diverted from our landfills and waterways.

The opponents of this system—often polluters who seem to regard the idea of being asked to help clean up their own mess as an unconscionable moral affront—speak of updating the system as if it will cause the sky to crash down on them. “Prices will skyrocket, people will stop drinking beverages!” They said the same thing in 1982 when the Bottle Bill was first enacted. They said the same thing in 2009 when it was previously expanded. Now it's 2025, and they seem to hope we will have forgotten that the sky never fell, people buy and drink more beverages than ever, and that it is exactly rising prices that make this issue so urgent. A Siena poll conducted in 2024² showed that a majority of low-income New Yorkers, those most impacted by inflation and higher costs at the grocery store, favor the Bottle Bill and want it expanded and supported. In fact, studies have shown that someone redeeming Bottle Bill material is most likely to spend the money they earn from redemption in the same venue at which they redeemed, meaning taking your bottles and cans back to the store can actually help reduce the cost of a grocery bill.

¹ *Independent Recyclers in New York City: Sector Profile and Pathways to Inclusion*, 2023, <https://www.surewecan.org/study2023>

² *Siena College Poll*, Siena College Research Institute, May 13-15, 2024

If the paralysis around this issue continues, all New Yorkers' lives will continue to be severely affected: their communities will be more littered, their waterways more polluted, and their income hampered. We're not talking about reinventing the wheel—this system works, and works very well. It simply needs to be updated to a contemporary standard, and supported by its stakeholders. New York can't afford to take it for granted any longer.