

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Ever been stuck trying to fix a phone or appliance? A new 'right to repair' law may help 01H26E40DR50RZXZ1H96WSF7XD

CATHY WURZER: So if you've ever tried to tinker with your phone or called a local mechanic to fix an appliance, you may have run into a brick wall. Many products require specific parts or steps that companies only give out to licensed repair shops. For years, environmental groups, tech repair folks, and farmers around the country have tried to change that. Minnesota recently gave some of these groups a win by becoming the fourth state to pass what's called a right-to-repair law. It takes effect July of 2024 and will require companies to provide instructions and parts to fix newer phones, laptops, and appliances. Joining us right now is Emily Barker. She's the executive director of Reuse Minnesota, a nonprofit that pushed for this change. Hey, welcome back, Emily.

EMILY BARKER: Hi, Cathy. Thanks so much for inviting me to chat with you today.

CATHY WURZER: Absolutely. So I'd mentioned that you were pushing, as part of this coalition of groups, including farmers and repair shops that want to get this law passed. Why is it important for all these groups?

EMILY BARKER: Well, the big thing is that electronics are in everything we own these days. You've got them in the smallest of things and then in the biggest things important-wise in terms of our phones and our computers, and they just impact all of our day-to-day lives. And unfortunately, there are a number of barriers that can keep folks from being able to repair those. And we feel that it's important to level the playing field for independent repair shops to be able to help folks, as well as people to do their own independent repair.

CATHY WURZER: Instead of just throwing something away--

EMILY BARKER: Right.

CATHY WURZER: --in frustration.

EMILY BARKER: Yes, that's a huge factor, and the environmental piece. Electronic e-waste is huge. It's on the rise and has been, even more so with COVID and everybody working from home and such. And so being able to repair electronics and keeping them in use longer is an environmental win. It's a jobs win. It's just great all around.

CATHY WURZER: A number of national outlets, including National Public Radio, have reported that Minnesota's new law is the most expansive right-to-repair law that a state has passed so far. Can you expand on that a little bit?

EMILY BARKER: Yeah, so as you noted, we're the fourth state to come-- to bring some legislation online. And they're all a little different, or rather, quite different. So New York has a law that impacts electronics as well, so consumer electronics, but it doesn't allow business-to-business and business-to-government.

So the reason that that's really important is schools are some of the biggest user of electronics. You look at Chromebooks and such. And being able to repair those and have responsible use of our tax dollars and keep those in good working order is really important. And unfortunately, that was excluded in the New York law. So this helped expand that. The Minnesota law does not include agriculture, which Colorado does, so we are working to complement each other here. But it is the most comprehensive. It includes appliances, which other laws do not. And so we definitely are excited about how expansive it is.

CATHY WURZER: I'm glad you brought up the agriculture part of this because I was thinking about the various testimony given over this bill during session. And I believe there was a lawmaker who said, look, I mean, there's a reason that farm equipment should not be included because it's-- these are huge machines that can cause death and serious injury, and you need an expert to fix these. What of that?

EMILY BARKER: So I'll be honest. I think it's not a very fair assessment. And to be honest, I think a lot of farmers might find that offensive. The reality is that a lot of what the farmers lack is the diagnostic equipment to actually figure out what's wrong, so not the tools, not the parts, but in fact, the machine to hook it up. So a lot of our cars have the same thing. You go, and they plug it in. They tell you, this is what needs to be repaired. Same thing's true for a lot of the big farm equipment now where so much is computer-based.

And what ends up happening is you have somebody that has to come out, do the diagnostic, and then they tell the farmer, and the farmer gets the parts and does the repairs themselves anyway. So I think that it's a little disingenuous, to be honest, that that's a really valid concern. We all want to be safe, and we've been very clear that right-to-repair is not right-to-modify. It's not right to override systems and make things dangerous. It's the right to get things in working order. And farmers, of all groups, are very good at that. They need to for many reasons. And so we don't feel that that's a valid concern. We recognize that that's the way things went this year, but we don't feel that that's a legit concern with this legislation.

CATHY WURZER: I do note that John Deere, Apple, Samsung, some other companies have provided some instructions for repairing products, so I'm presuming they're feeling some of this pressure from the public to do so. So why was it important to require companies to do this?

EMILY BARKER: So for example, with the phones, for Apple, for example, they did start providing that. And we appreciate that. I think it's great when companies do recognize that consumers, individuals want to do this. One of the challenges is that there are still some restrictions about who can do that. So if my phone breaks, I can request that, but an independent repair shop can't do that.

So it's paired-- there are certain rules about who can and can't still get access to that. And I think, again, that diagnostic equipment is still limiting. And so whether or not people can do the full repairs-- it's great to be able to do a screen repair, obviously. But sometimes there are other things that need to be addressed, and so all of those parts aren't available.

And the other truth is as much as I love the idea of fixing my own electronics, I've got a young child. I have a full-time job. I'm not going to do that. And so I would prefer to just take it to an independent shop and have somebody who knows what they're doing, has the environment, the tools to actually do it do it. And so I think there are, certainly, many people who want to do their own repairs, but the reality is that a lot of us just don't have the capacity or time and interest to do that. And being able to have independent repair shops do that is super critical to this. And

CATHY WURZER: If someone is trying to find a repair shop or learn how to fix things on their own, is there a place where they can go for some help?

EMILY BARKER: Yeah, so there's a few different resources. So my organization Reuse Minnesota-- we have a directory with some businesses that offer those services. In addition, there are a lot of counties that run fix-it clinics, and so that's a fun way-- if you want to start learning some of those skills yourself-- that you can take different items in, not just digital things, but you can take your items in to get repaired. So that can be a great place to start building those skills.

And there are a number of resources nationally-- some groups that have resources for people who want to do fix-it clinic type things. So I think that's definitely growing. IFixit is a great resource. They have a number of repair manuals that they've written up themselves and have available online when the manufacturers don't provide them. And so there are a lot of things online that-- folks can find those resources.

CATHY Because you pushed for the new law, how will it be enforced into the future?

WURZER:

EMILY BARKER: Yeah, the Minnesota law Falls under the attorney general, which we felt was the best place for it. The attorney general was very supportive, and we really appreciate that. Their office really felt strongly about this moving forward. And so if there are complaints, folks can take that there, and they will investigate the claims and any issues and then move forward that way. And we think that that's a really great mechanism in Minnesota.

CATHY And finally, because farm equipment, medical devices, video game consoles didn't make it into the final version

WURZER: of the bill, will you go back, say, next session and try for another run at this, or just see how things are going to happen here in the next few years?

EMILY BARKER: That's a great question. We know our coalition recognizes that the conversation isn't over, for sure. I do think, because the agricultural piece is moving forward in Colorado, that that will really help see-- hey, look what's happening in Colorado. See how this is playing out. We do feel that there will be benefits seen in Minnesota because of the Colorado law.

I think we'll definitely be continuing. And there are some smaller things, like personal tools and lawn equipment, that also got left out that I would personally like to see, especially since we try to do a lot to help what the average person has in their garage. And so we will definitely be having more of this conversation into the future.

CATHY All right, Emily, I appreciate your time. Thank you so much.

WURZER:

EMILY BARKER: Thank you. Really appreciate it, Cathy.

CATHY Emily Barker is the executive director of Reuse Minnesota.

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