Repair and reuse may be future of e-waste, but CRTs are unwelcome reminder of past

Dive Brief:

- Modern devices such as phones, tablets and computers can be valuable when refurbished or dismantled for parts. While many manufacturers still make this challenging, organizations such as iFixit are confident that will change. If they can get new state repair laws passed. Yet even if recyclers could efficiently extract value from these devices, they would still be overwhelmed by low-value cathode ray tube (CRT) units such as old televisions. 

- “The reuse market has long since dried up and the export market to where they’re re-manufactured or used in other countries has just recently dried up,” said Luke Soules, co-founder of iFixit, during a session at the Northeast Recycling Council’s fall conference.

- It was estimated that CRT units comprise 70-80% of the material received by local programs. Some of the plastic, metals and low-grade circuit boards may have value, but the cost of managing the leaded glass outweighs it. One representative from the Delaware Solid Waste Authority said any valuable electronics that residents do bring in end up paying for the cost of CRT disposal in his state.

Dive Insight:

As noted by Jason Linnell, executive director of the National Centers for Electronics Recycling, about two-thirds of U.S. residents now live in one of the 25 states with e-waste laws, though the system is far from comprehensive and some states have even moved to repeal their laws. The challenges in each state vary, but burdensome CRT units are a common thread.

The Environmental Protection Agency has noticed a trend of mismanaged CRT glass around the country and large retailers such as Best Buy have stopped accepting the units in some areas. The good news is that states such as Connecticut, California and Washington have begun to see a drop in the volume of CRT units received in a sign that the supply of old units sitting in houses across the country may be decreasing.

CRT units will likely continue to show up at e-waste drop-off centers in large volumes for at least a couple more years. During that time it’s possible that the repair movement will gain traction and help reduce the volume of newer devices coming in, or at least make them easier to deal with when they do. Though as noted by Soules, during a dismantling demonstration on a small Nespresso machine, the presence of circuit boards in household appliances is likely to increase.

“Design for repairability and design for recycling is not on most designers’ radar screens,” he said. “The definition of e-waste is going to become more and more of a challenge.”
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UPDATE: New Jersey e-waste bill advances to Gov. Christie’s desk