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# Tidy Profits

## Organizers Thrive Cleaning Up Corridor Clutter

Jacquie Ross enters a room and looks her challenge — clutter, trash and disarray — straight on. The Ellicott City professional organizer comes armed with storage bins, baskets, label machines and file organizers to clear the way.

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*Jacquie Ross of CastAway the Clutter cleans up the mess at a home in Clarksville. Photo by John Keith*

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### Organizers Thrive Cleaning Up Corridor Clutter

By [Tammi Slater](#) | Corridor Inc. Staff Writer

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Despite a weak economy, people continue to buy and their closets, homes and offices are overflowing.

From pack rats and hoarders to businesses and homeowners, professional organizers in the Baltimore-Washington Corridor are cleaning up and adding to their bottom line.

“There’s not many professions where 99 percent of the people are immediately pleased,” said Betsy Fein, president of Rockville-based Clutterbusters, which has clients in Montgomery, Prince George’s and Anne Arundel counties, Washington, D.C. and Virginia. “It’s like being an interior designer; you go in and you have a vision.”

When Fein started her company in 2002 she would work approximately 100 hours a month on jobs. The company now has five to 10 organizers working locally with clients — approximately 400 hours per month. And Clutterbusters has expanded to include franchises in Columbia and Florida.

Organizers begin with an initial consultation to survey the space as well as discuss goals and possible issues. They then begin sorting and categorizing as they make decisions along the way to donate, throw out, sell or keep items.

“It’s like when you have to lose 100 pounds but you don’t know how and when to start,” said Fein.

Local organizers have seen it all from clients with excessive collections and homes with tiny pathways surrounded by piles of clutter from floor to ceiling to overflowing, nonfunctional closets and unusual, last resort storage spaces.

“You wouldn’t believe how many people use their shower and oven as additional holding space,” said Fein.

Fein recalled working with a hoarder, someone who never throws anything away. The client had accumulated so much that Fein filled three 30-yard dumpsters with papers and trash.

Another Clutterbusters client filled 15 bags of donations in a four-hour period.



*Clutterbusters' Betsy Fein (front) and Lynn Lee organize a kitchen in Laytonsville, Md. Photo by John Keith*

Professional organizers can range from \$60 to \$85 an hour in the Corridor. The average person needs a minimum of 15 hours of organizing, according to the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO).

Getting organizational guidance has helped Nancy Brennan find a system in her kitchen and home office. Brennan, a Clarksville resident who hired Ross, said she was organized until she had kids.

"I always think I'm going to do something and then I don't so I finally surrendered," she said. "I had a hard time coming up with something that's both functional and looks good."

In two days, Ross helped Brennan organize her kitchen cabinets and pantry with spice racks, cabinet space savers and dividers. Ross is now working to transform Brennan's home office, which is cluttered with paper, books, extra wires and boxes, into an organized system.

Seeing chaos come to order is rewarding, said Mardona Akines, owner of Organized Life Etc. Inc. in Upper Marlboro. Akines works with clients in Prince George's, Montgomery and Anne Arundel counties as well as Virginia.

"It's the same way people go to a doctor, accountant or maid for their service," said Akines, who currently has about a dozen clients.

Businesses such as law offices, real estate agencies and even day spas seek professional help with paper filing, space planning and moving, said Fein.

Organizing storage and supply closets are a common request of business owners, said Fein, adding that all business clients struggle with paper management.

The average executive wastes six weeks a year searching for lost documents and 80 percent of what is kept is never used, according to NAPO, which has 4,200 members in the United States and 134 professional organizers in Maryland. Eight years ago, NAPO had just 800 members.

"People didn't understand the benefits before of professional organizing but now it's seen as a status symbol [for the client]," said Laura Leist, president of NAPO.

"This industry will keep growing. But people need to shop with a purpose because if you don't have the space there's a cost associated with that."

Organizational problems stem from people buying and never purging, said Ross.

"People just keep buying and shopping," she said. "There's so many choices out there today and people really need to stop and think, do I really need it and where am I going to put it, even if it's the deal of the century."

Fein agreed.

**Clutter Bugs**

- \* A four-drawer file cabinet, when full, holds **18,000** pages.
- \* About **80 percent** of the clutter in your home is a result of disorganization not lack of space.
- \* A company with 1,000 employees wastes **\$48,000** per week – or nearly \$2.5 million per year – due to an inability to locate and retrieve information.
- \* **50 percent** of homeowners rate the garage as the most disorganized place in the house.
- \* **73 percent** of business people said their impressions of colleagues were influenced by the way their desks are organized.
- \* People wear **20 percent** of the clothes they own **80 percent** of the time.
- \* The average executive wastes **six weeks** a year searching for lost documents.
- \* More than **50 percent** of adults say they have purchased or would be willing to purchase containers, storage systems or shelving to help them get organized.
- \* **80 percent** of what is filed never gets looked at again.

Source: National Association of Professional Organizers

"We live in a super size world with Costco and Sam's Club but if you don't have the space for that, it just doesn't work," she said. "People have an inbox but they don't have an outbox."

Stay-at-home mothers, working parents, newlyweds, new parents, empty nesters and shopaholics are common clients seeking help.

Females are often the culprits of closets overflowing with shoes and handbags and

all clients struggle with paper such as mail, receipts and newspapers, said Ross, who recommends clients go through mail by the trash to weed out the junk.

“Paper is the most time consuming thing to go through because we find birth certificates, uncashed checks, money — you never know what you’re going to find,” said Akines.

Two of the biggest challenges of the job are convincing people that quality is better than quantity and working with clients who aren’t ready for change, said Ross.

“Our job isn’t to tell people what to get rid of but to encourage purging,” said Ross, adding that cable TV shows such as “Clean House” and “Mission Organization” have also helped put the industry on the map.

“I tell people this is an investment in their lives and it affects your life more than you think,” said Akines.