

How to Make Sewing Kits for Household Goods



Household Goods is an organization located in Acton, MA. It provides a full range of donated furniture and household items, free of charge, to help people in need make a home. One of the items that they provide is a sewing kit that could be used for mending. Alice Wiggin started this project and provided sewing kits for many, many years until she passed away in 2019. At that point I took on the project, with the help of my friend Suzanne. But after more than 6 years, I need to pass the torch to other people, and I hope my words of advice are helpful.

Each sewing kit has at a minimum: Thread, needles, pins, tape measure, scissors, buttons, and safety pins. Some of these items I buy, but the bulk of what I use comes from the generous donations of people in the community. I regularly receive donations from the Concord Piecemakers Quilt Guild, The Chelmsford Quilters Guild, people in the community, and from Household Goods (they separate out useful things for me from their incoming donations). Yard sales and discount stores such as Mardens of Maine can also be fruitful.

Household Goods has a lot of scheduled clients going through each week. Not all of them want a sewing kit. Some just want something small that will fit in a drawer in their small apartment. But some are serious sewers who appreciate more. Surprisingly, more than 50 kits are given out EACH MONTH. Due to this volume, the kits contain limited amounts of pins, needles, thread, and safety pins so that we can produce so many kits. This document will give you many tips on how to make kits.

List of helpful donated items

When people ask you what will be useful items to help you make kits, here's what you can say:

- Clean containers in good condition: cookie and holiday tins, plastic storage containers such as Rubbermaid, *rigid* black takeout containers with clear lids, old sewing baskets, small coffee pod cardboard boxes etc. Most sizes are welcome. Very small containers such as Altoids tins and empty pin boxes are useful for holding pins, needles, or buttons.
- Thread: full or partially filled large, medium, small spools, bobbins, thread wound on cardboard from hotel sewing kits. Empty spools, bobbins and embroidery floss cards can be used to wind thread on.
- Needles: for hand sewing. A wide range of sizes is useful.
- Pins: flat head or pins with rounded heads. Preferably not too short. Large corsage pins are not very useful.
- Flexible Tape measures: for measuring people, not wood.
- Scissors: all sizes are welcome. Preferably not pinking shears.
- Buttons: for garments. All sizes & colors are welcome. White dress shirt buttons especially.
- Safety pins: 1" sturdy pins are best but all sizes welcome.

When I make sewing kits, I start by making a supply of what I call components: pins or needles that are stuck into pieces of fabric, small bags of buttons, thread wound on bobbins or cardboard, several safety pins hooked onto another safety pin. These collections I make while watching TV, then organize them in my basement.

When it's time to construct a kit – I just pull from each component collection and the kit goes together quickly.

Every time you receive donations you will need to set aside time to sort them.

- Inspect each container and determine if you need to wash them. Cookie tins frequently have crumbs, Tea tins usually smell of tea, black takeout containers may have food grease even after washing, Altoids boxes smell very minty. If you accept small old prescription pill bottles, I recommend always washing them, even if they look clean.
- Next separate out thread – I usually set aside the white, black, and blue threads (see thread section later), and then divide the other thread into small, medium, and big items which helps later since not all containers will fit large spools. If a spool is old (e.g. is on a wooden spool) see how easily it snaps – if it's very weak, then throw it out!
- For scissors I separate them out into 1) large scissors such as shears, 2) medium small scissors that fit most containers, 3) small scissors, 4) teeny tiny scissors. Be sure to test that the scissors actually cut thread and/or fabric.
- I separate out the white dress shirt buttons from all other buttons.
- Pins, Needles, safety pins, and tape measures get put with like items.

These items can go straight to my basement where I make up the kits: scissors, thread except white/black/blue, tape measures, clean containers. All other items I will use to make components which can then go to the basement.

Other items to have on hand: packing tape, rubber bands, labels, long strips of fabric or ribbon for tying kits.

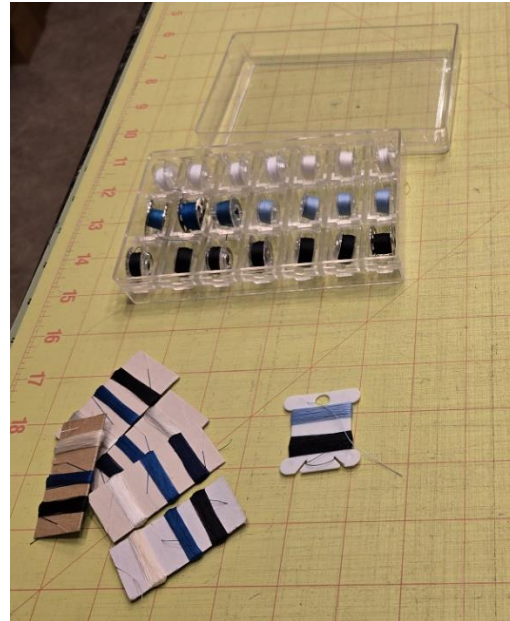
Components: Thread

Since I believe the sewing kits will be mainly used for mending, I like each kit to have

- white, black, and either blue or grey thread.
- Plus I also throw in one to three other colors.

I set aside the white, black and blue/grey thread when I sort donations. I sometimes wind white, black and blue thread on small bits of cardboard by hand. Or I use my sewing machine to wind empty bobbins with those 3 colors, and then store the bobbins in a bobbin case for later use in the kits.

Some kit containers are large and can hold large spools. Some “micro” kit containers are very tiny and can only hold the thread that is on cardboard.



You can also rig your sewing machine’s bobbin winder to wind thread onto empty spools.

I put a very wide bobbin on the machine’s bobbin winding spindle, then place a loop of tape on top of the bobbin so that I can later stick a spool on it.

Before sticking the spool to the top of the wide bobbin, I start winding thread on it.

Then, I use the machine to spin the spool. As the thread is wound onto the spool, I use my right hand to hold a very large yarn needle that is placed vertically through the spool – to prevent the spool from flying off. And I use my left hand to guide the thread up and down as the spool spins.



Components: Needles

When making a needle component, I try to use 6 differently sized needles. I usually put them on a piece of fabric that is 1.25x4" that is folded over into two thicknesses. The double thickness helps the needles stay more rigid. I sometimes use small bits of scrap fabric that have interfacing on them, or I use the round needle containers.

If I get donated pincushions or large "needle books" – I add the pins and needles directly to them.

I usually don't use self-threading needles in these components. I instead use them as "extras".



Components: Pins

When making a pins component, I try to use about 15 pins. I usually put them on a piece of fabric that is 2.5x4" that is folded over into two thicknesses. The double thickness helps the pins stay more rigid.

If the pins have big heads, I will add them to the fabric with some higher than others (see photo).

If the pins are in a box and I'm not sure the box will reliably stay closed then I add a rubber band.



Components: Tape Measures

Tape Measures are one item that I sometimes have to buy, since people don't usually give a lot of them. I've found packs of 24 tape measures on Amazon.

Some of the "micro" sewing kits are in containers that don't have space for normal tape measures. For such sewing kits I use paper tape measures. You can find them on Amazon. They are used by nurses as well as sports and music teams to measure for uniforms.



Components: Scissors

Test to make sure they can cut at least thread. Having a basic scissor sharpener can be helpful.

All sizes of scissors can be used in sewing kits. I match the size of the scissors with the size of the container. The most frequently used scissors are the 5.5" blue/pink scissors in the upper left of the photo – they will fit in most containers, and can cut thread & fabric. I buy them on Amazon – they come in several colors.

You'll also see some snips and some foldable scissors in the photo. Scissors that are foldable or have a cap covering the sharp ends are useful for containers that are fabric pouches.

If a pair of scissors won't cut thread, and I can't sharpen it, then I donate them to Swansons

Fabrics. They have a scissor sharpener, so maybe they'll have luck.



Components: Safety Pins

I usually give 5 safety pins per kit. I feel that the most useful size is about 1" or a little bigger, but some of the donated pins are very small or very large. Also be on the lookout for safety pins made from thin wimpy wire – I try to only put one of those in a kit.



Components: Buttons

Since I believe the sewing kits will be mainly used for mending, I like each kit to have

- 5 or so white buttons that are dress shirt buttons.
- I also like to give a button big enough to be for a waistband.
- And then I add other random buttons, especially some small dark-colored shirt buttons.

I usually separate out donated buttons into these three categories, to make it easier to create button collections for kits.

Buttons can be put in a variety of containers. I usually use small plastic zip-loc bags such as those used for jewelry – they are 1.5x2" roughly. Sometimes people donate those bags because some clothing comes with extra buttons in such bags.

I also sometimes use small pill bottles (be sure to thoroughly wash pill bottles).



Sample kit: Pencil pouch

Pencil pouches can be used as containers. Be sure to use items that are not too sharp, such as pins and needles in a box, and scissors with blunt or covered tips.

These kits can be a challenge to seal with packing tape.



Sample kit: Tall Skinny Containers

Some containers are tall and skinny. These include Pirouline cookie containers or tea containers. For these containers I like to include an Altoids box containing

- Sharp things like fabric holding pins & needles
- Buttons
- Safety pins

That way, when the person reaches in to get something out, they won't stab themselves on the needles or pins.

These containers also usually have a lot of space and so I use bigger spools.



Sample kit: Small Container

Some clients of Household Goods like very small sewing kits because they don't have a lot of space in their apartment. You'll need thread on bobbins or small spools or cardboard, small amounts of buttons, and small scissors for these kits.



Sample kit: Micro Container

Micro kits are really small. You'll need paper tape measures, thread on cardboard, small amounts of buttons, and very small scissors for these kits.



Sample kit: Old Sewing Kits

Old sewing kits are large. I think people who take these are more serious sewers. So, I give them nice large scissors (plus pinking shears if I have any), large spools, and more extras such as pincushions, fusible patches, Velcro, seam rippers, etc.



Extras

Sometimes you will get donations that are not on the list of suggested items. If these might be useful in a sewing kit, then I throw them in randomly.

These might include:

- Velcro, snaps, zippers, ribbon
- Seam rippers, thimbles
- Specialty needles such as those used for upholstery
- Self-threading needles since they are weird and most people aren't familiar with them.
- Hemming rulers
- Stitch Witchery, seam binding, elastic

However, I usually collect machine sewing items and donate to other organizations. Such items include machine sewing needles, and various sewing machine presser feet. I also usually don't include crochet hooks, knitting needles, and rug hooks.



Finishing a kit

When you think a kit is complete, please run through this checklist:

- Ensure that the minimum items are included in the kit – thread, needles, pins, tape measure, scissors, buttons, and safety pins. (refer to the label)
- If the container has holes (some take-out containers have vent holes), then tape them up.
- Close container, and add a label sticker.
- Tape container closed with packing tape.
- There are frequently small children visiting Household Goods and we don't want them to find pins and needles!
- If the container has a nice paper exterior that will be damaged by tape, then tie it closed with a couple strips of fabric. Cut a hole in the label while it is still stuck to its original backing, then thread the strip of fabric through the label's hole.



Contents of this sewing kit:

Thread, needles, pins, measuring tape, buttons, scissors, & safety pins

All the kits have the same items.

Enjoy!