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Local thrift stores adapt to COVID-19 by limiting donation times, quarantining items

By Jack Rooney Sentinel Staff

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced local thrift shops to alter operations in a variety of ways. Project Share Thrift Store, in the basement of the Keene Recreation Center at 312 Washington St., has largely paused accepting donations due to concern over the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Jack Rooney / Sentinel Staff

When the COVID-19 pandemic upended life in the Monadnock Region last March, local thrift stores were among the many businesses forced to close.

And before they reopened last summer, many area residents — suddenly spending lots of time at home — took the opportunity to clean out their closets, and gather donations to send to thrift shops.

“I think overall, people are just really understanding what they don’t need in life,” said Karen Zamojski, manager of Experienced Goods Thrift Shop in Brattleboro, which provides up to 70 percent of the operating budget for Brattleboro Area Hospice. “And so we are happy to accept whatever items they feel they don’t need in their homes anymore.”



Since the coronavirus outbreak began, though, thrift stores have adopted health and safety protocols that change the process for donations. Experienced Goods, for example, went from accepting donations five days a week to one, and moved its donation-processing location down the block from its storefront at 77 Flat St. The store now only accepts donations on Tuesdays from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at 80 Flat St., in the C.F. Church Building.

“That was actually a good thing to come out of it,” Zamojski said of the decision to move the donation-processing space, which was previously located in a busy area of the shop. “... It has actually allowed us to keep that kind of chaotic activity outside the store.”

The Salvation Army Thrift Store in Swanzey has kept its donation processing on-site but has switched to an appointment system for accepting donations, according to Lt. David LaBossiere, who oversees the Keene Corps of the Salvation Army with his wife, Emma.

“As it stands now, we still are taking appointments for the donations, just to limit how much is coming in,” David LaBossiere said.

At times last year, people looking to donate to the Salvation Army Thrift Store had to wait up to a month for an appointment, LaBossiere added, in part because the store was placing all donated items into quarantine for several days before offering them for sale, a practice other local thrifts

stores, including Experienced Goods, adopted. But as health experts have learned more about the novel coronavirus, the Salvation Army has decreased the quarantine time for donated items to a day or two.

Like Experienced Goods, LaBossiere said the Salvation Army's altered donation process has made it easier for store staff to manage donations. So, he said, the store probably will stick with the appointment system even after the pandemic subsides, though the Salvation Army will add more appointment slots in the coming months.

"I'd like to see the donation hours be almost the entire time that the store is open," LaBossiere said. The Salvation Army Thrift Store at 132 Monadnock Highway is open Monday to Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.



And while the COVID-19 pandemic has led thrift stores like The Salvation Army and Experienced Goods to alter their operations, the public health crisis has had more dire consequences for other organizations that rely on donations of goods. The St. James Thrift Shop, which was in the Jonathan Daniels building behind the St. James Episcopal Church on West Street in Keene, closed last summer, citing the affects of the pandemic.

Planet Aid, a national nonprofit that has clothing donation bins throughout the region, has temporarily closed all of its bins throughout the Monadnock Region, according to a spokeswoman for the organization.

"The pandemic has certainly been a factor in their closure," spokeswoman Monica Dutcher said in an email. "We do hope to bring the bins back to the generous people of these communities soon."

Dutcher did not provide a timeline for when local Planet Aid bins would accept donations again, but added the organization collected 400,000 pounds of clothing from bins in Keene from March 2019 through last July.

“We look forward to pulling those collection numbers again,” she said.

Meanwhile, Project Share Thrift Shop, in the basement of the Keene Recreation Center at 312 Washington St., has drastically limited the number of donations it accepts, according to Tammy Catozzi, who runs the store.

“Mainly, that’s because we have such an overflow left from last year,” she said. “... We do ask, if people do have donations, that they call us to check to see if we are taking.”

Ultimately, as local thrift stores continue to navigate the pandemic, Zamojski said shops like Experienced Goods will continue to rely on community support and ensure safe donation and shopping experiences.

“We live in a very generous community,” she said. “... Folks are just willing to bend and do what they have to do to support us, which has been wonderful.”

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