



The Pandemic Dilemmas Confronting Thrift Stores

Brienne Berry, Ursinus College

Luisa S. Deprez, University of Southern Maine, Portland

They approached the meeting site cautiously, arriving singly and standing an awkward distance apart from each other. Instead of meeting inside the local community center, they met in the shade of an outdoor pavilion. Instead of the warm sound of conversation and laughter, the conversation is stilted: “oh, is that you? I could hardly recognize you with your mask on!” It was a meeting of a community-based thrift store – a small volunteer operation, run almost exclusively by women in their 60’s, 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s. The volunteers had gathered to discuss how they might respond to the pandemic.

The thrift store in rural Penobscot County, Maine had been closed since mid-March once the full impact of the pandemic became clear. The women, who typically spend one day per week sorting and selling used goods, know they fall into the high-risk category for complications associated with COVID-19. They are all over age 65 – a population that has to date, made **up eight out of ten COVID-19-related deaths** in the United States and nearly all deaths in **Maine**. Almost 28% of cases in the state are among those 60 years and older; 52% of all cases are **women**. Many of the thrift shop volunteers have underlying health conditions – or live with those who do – a factor associated with **more severe COVID-19 outcomes**. And all volunteer in a small space with cramped, crowded aisles that attracts throngs of community members to shop, socialize, and donate. All these factors combine to make **volunteering in a thrift shop an activity of the “highest risk” for seniors**.