



May 15, 2020

This week you will read about how a number of our staff have pivoted to take on new duties in order to meet the needs of children in our community. We've used some of our capacity across the affiliate in order to accomplish this, even while preparing for the Store's reopening.

Today, we take our first careful steps into the new normal by inviting shoppers back to the Store. As with every move that we make during COVID-19, this decision was made carefully and in consultation with expert advice. We're doing this because the Store provides an essential service to the community. People need to be able to maintain their homes. During this windy, rainy spring it is important to have access to materials to fix leaky roofs, damaged gutters and broken toilets.



The Minor family, one of 28 families receiving a personalized care package of books and toys this week

We are so proud to be able to answer the call and meet needs like book distribution, food delivery and mask-making while reopening the Habitat Store and moving forward with building homes. At the same time, without the revenue that the Store provides in normal times, our organization is stretched. If you have the means, we hope that you will consider [supporting our mission financially](#).

Habitat Store Reopens, Carefully



The registers at the Habitat Store with their new safety precautions

Beginning today, The Habitat Store is back open to the public in a controlled and limited way in order to provide building materials that help people maintain safe homes.

"Toilets, kitchen and bathroom sinks," says Habitat Store Manager David Winder. "If those things don't work in your home, that's not a safe place to live."

In March, as the first cases of COVID-19 appeared in the region, Habitat opted to close our retail store out of concern for the safety of our volunteers, staff and customers. Immediately after the closure, as part of [our Interim Plan](#), we then quickly pivoted to repurpose the Store as a critical distribution hub for emergency resources in the community.

Five thousand square feet of the Habitat Store were converted into a manufacturing and staging area for a mask-making partnership which has now produced and distributed **more than 5,000 masks to vulnerable neighbors and frontline health workers**. Store staff began using the Habitat truck to deliver food for Meals on Wheels. Customer Service specialist Sheron Sinclair took charge of making bundles of donated books and games for distribution to local families.

Now, consistent with Governor Northam's first phase of reopening, the Store will once again welcome shoppers while continuing to serve as a community resource hub.

Safety is our top concern.

Customers will be metered in carefully to avoid overcrowding. **Masks are**

required for anyone entering the building and will be available to any customer who needs one. Shopping hours have been limited from 10 am to 4 pm on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Donation drop-offs will be restricted to Tuesdays and Wednesdays by appointment only. The large donation pick-up service will take place on Tuesdays and Fridays.

This separation of hours and activities is designed to minimize the amount of activity taking place on our loading dock at any one time while allowing as many staff and volunteers as possible to focus on one category of activity.

Management has worked closely with the Thomas Jefferson District Health Department to develop safe rules and practices.

Shoppers will find designated entrances, directions for traffic flow and line spacing at cash registers. Surfaces will be constantly sanitized and volunteers will be stationed at key points to monitor safety. Habitat even reengineered the physical space to allow for social distancing throughout.

"We've widened our aisles so there's more room for more than one person on an aisle," Winder says.

Winder and Charlottesville Habitat have been part of the leadership effort nationally to develop measures to reopen "Restores" safely. Winder is part of the national Restore Subcommittee, developing a standard handbook of guidelines and policies for stores like our Habitat Store.

"Before the Pandemic, we were putting together a handbook that would go over general operating policies, and then we pivoted to dealing with this," Winder says. "We're now writing out guidelines for COVID-19 for other stores to follow."



5,000 square feet of the Store have been allocated for our mask making program



Donation Specialist, Bert, washing his hands in a newly installed sink by the donation dock

The Habitat Store sells discounted and donated home goods that are necessary for homeowners to shelter safely in place, many of which are [available through our E-Store](#).

The Store is a key component of Habitat's homebuilding operations. All sale proceeds go toward building safe, decent and affordable housing in partnership with low wealth families in our community. To date, Habitat has built and sold almost 250 homes, helping families earn \$70M in home equity and providing a permanent bridge out of poverty.



Store staff have designated an entrance and exit, with room for customers to wait for entry while maintaining a safe distance

Connecting Kids with Books & Games



The Talbert Family with books from their care package. Special thanks to Schoolhouse Thrift Shop for the gifts of books and toys and to our staff for assembling packages!

Social isolation takes a toll on everyone. Especially children.

In response, as a central component of our [interim mission goal](#) of supporting vulnerable community members through the COVID crisis, Habitat has implemented a broad initiative to connect families with resources to help children stay active, stimulated and up to date on school work.

"After two and a half months of being at home, just having a different book or a different board game is huge," says Sheron Sinclair, a Habitat Homeowner and staff member who has devoted some of her work hours recently to assembling packages of books, games and DVDs ready for delivery to families who requested them.

With schools and playgrounds closed, many children need to keep themselves entertained at home and may not have internet access or even siblings in the household to play with.



*Larry Scott delivering toys and books.
76 children will receive such a package this week.*

Enter Schoolhouse Thrift Shop, a local ministry of the Episcopal Church.

The store ordinarily sells many affordable used books and board games at their retail location on Rio Road. But since they've closed due to COVID-19, the organization kindly offered some of their inventory for Habitat to distribute for free.

"Finis Craft is the guy who runs [Schoolhouse Thrift Shop] and he said 'we have bins and bins of stuff and we can't sell them,'" says Kathleen Baines, a Habitat staff member, "so he dropped them all off for our team to distribute to families."

Baines is normally Habitat's Office & Human Resources Coordinator, but as part of our efforts to redeploy staff and resources during COVID-19 she has taken on additional duties as the "Duchess of Toyland" to **connect donations of books, toys and games with children who can use them**. Some are going to families at Southwood, others to partner families who are already in Habitat homes or part of our homeownership program and some are going to the 170 families who recently applied for the Habitat program.

Baines' work is being aided by another critical partnership. Book Baskets, a local charity started by a retired UVA librarian three decades ago, has distributed hundreds of thousands of books to area children since its founding in 1996. "These donations are lovely because they are all brand new," said Baines. "We got about fourteen boxes from them, I'd say about two hundred individual books... now that we have all of these things we are trying to figure out how to distribute these based on age and interests."

This is more complicated than it sounds. When most people visit a library or bookstore they aren't interested in the first book they see on a shelf. Each child has his or her own interests, so Baines designed a plan, with Habitat's Family Partnerships staff, to match individual kids with the books and games from Book Baskets that may suit them. Habitat's Family Partnerships staff then matches kids with the Schoolhouse Thrift books.

"We've taken a really individualized approach to matching families with items that their kids will be excited about," says Kim Purdy, Habitat's Community Engagement Program Manager. "Each bag is different. I just filled one up with everything and anything princess related, as requested for one special rising kindergartner."

As of now, the bins are "overflowing, full of all kinds of books, games, cards, coloring books, board games and DVDs," says Sinclair. The materials are set to go out to 76 children from 28 different families during the coming week.

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