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## Thrift store falls victim to state budget cuts

By [Judy Benson](#) Day Staff Writer

### Helping Hands in Norwich supposed to close June 30

**Norwich** - For more than 10 years, Linda Middleton has been a regular at the Helping Hands thrift store, depending on the racks of baby clothes for \$1.50 each, the pants and shirts and jackets in all sizes for \$3 or \$4 apiece and the shelves of low-priced books and toys to outfit the many foster children she and her husband have taken in over the years.

"They come to you with nothing," said Middleton, as she browsed the racks of the bright, well-organized shop on Monday. "I'm in here at least once a week, sometimes twice. If this place closes, it's going to be the poor that are going to take the hit."

The shop, run by United Community & Family Service, is facing closure on June 30 because of state budget cuts. For the past 14 years it has operated out of a storefront along a busy section of Town Street, across the street from the UCFS health clinic and next door to Stop & Shop.

Among the current fiscal year cuts made by Gov. Dannel P. Malloy in November was \$50,000 in funding to UCFS that supported the thrift shop and two other agency programs - one that provides the needy with rides to medical appointments, and the Careline system of check-in phone calls.

All three programs are staffed by volunteers, and all the items that stock the store are donated. But funding is needed to pay rent and utilities for the store, reimburse the volunteers for gas and other travel costs and pay UCFS employees' time to oversee the programs.

Jennifer Ermler, supervisor of marketing and volunteer services for UCFS, said there is interest from a party she declined to name in taking over the shop, but no final decisions have been made. No one has as yet come forward to rescue the transportation or call programs, however.

The possible new owner of the thrift shop would run it independently of UCFS, but maintain its mission of providing low-cost or no-cost second-hand clothing and household items to the needy. Net sales for the store are about \$200 to \$400 per day, Ermler said, but for the majority of the transactions, no money changes hands.

Instead, families who've lost everything due to a fire, homelessness or a sudden move due to domestic violence or other cause bring in vouchers from local social service agencies to pick out items for free. Last year, 2,019 families used vouchers at the store for everything from clothing to dishes to bedding, curtains and furniture, Ermler said. Beds are an especially big need.

"The doctors at UCFS will send families over with vouchers if they see their children are not clothed properly for the season," Ermler said.

Lori Rygielski, volunteer coordinator at UCFS, said the store provides everything from low-cost wedding gowns and "dress for success" suits that unemployed customers can wear to job interviews, to underwear and socks that cost 75 cents each. On the racks Monday, customers could find a full-length tan quilted women's winter coat for \$7; a blue Pacific Trails boys' ski jacket for \$3; green Lands End corduroy pants for \$4 and new knitted and crocheted baby sweaters, booties and hats donated by volunteers. Without the store, many residents would have a much harder time making ends meet, Rygielski and Ermler said, so they're hoping the closure won't

happen.

"We're keeping our fingers crossed," Ermler said.

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