

On the Mean Streets

A Guide to Dealing with the Homeless

By
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Introduction

I, like most of you, have never been homeless. But I often wondered what it must be like, to spend night after night on the mean streets or in a crowded public shelter.

Time after time, I found myself waking, flooded by the sadness that decent people were sleeping in the doorways of buildings, on park benches, in cardboard boxes or in shelters with all of their worldly possessions crammed into a plastic trash bag.

The world of the homeless is very far from mine—but in some ways it is quite near. For any of us, the loss of a job, the death of a spouse or a child, a severe physical disability or family problems, could be the route to total despair. These are the very tragedies that have happened to many homeless people. Struck by personal tragedies, the people living on the mean streets of any city, no matter its size, or in one of thousands of shelters across our great country, have lost their homes and have been deserted by the families and friends they once had.

But we have another choice: to be strengthened. Like any other problem, we can choose whether we will allow ourselves to be defeated by it or if we will emerge stronger for seeking solutions and offering a helping hand.

This is the time we ask, “What can I do?”

This is the time we tap our hidden resources and strengths.

This is the time we turn to other people, to the community, to religion for strength, guidance, and assistance.

If you have never witnessed the despair of the homeless first hand, it is easier to ignore them, and abandon them; even to assume that the homeless people are all derelicts, mentally ill, drug addicts—people beyond help, people who don’t deserve assistance.

As you will soon learn in the following pages, there are miracles that have been accomplished for displaced people—and by homeless people who are able to put their broken

lives back together. I marvel at the resiliency and the potential we all have, including the hundreds of thousands who will spend tonight in a shelter, on the mean streets, or living in an abandoned car. What can you do personally to help them? Sometimes the smallest gesture—and a good attitude—can go a long way.

You can start by reading on. However, if you do not feel led to learn more of how you can help the homeless and make a difference in their lives and yours you can pass this book on to a friend or give it to your church. If you feel that all you can do is write a check to help, please know that that is okay also.

Chapter One

Learn about the Homeless

The first—and the most important—thing you can do to help the homeless is to realize that the tired old stereotypes concerning them just are not true.

Myth: They're to blame for being homeless.

Fact: Most homeless are victims. Some have suffered from child abuse or violence. Nearly one quarter are children. Many have lost their jobs. All have lost their homes.

Myth: They don't work.

Fact: Many homeless people are among the working poor. A person earning minimum wage can't earn enough to support a family or pay inner-city rent.

Myth: They are mentally ill.

Fact: About 25 percent of the homeless are estimated to be mentally ill. One percent may need long-term hospitalization; the others can become self-sufficient with help.

Myth: They are heavy drug users.

Fact: Some homeless are substance abusers: research suggests one in four. Many of these are included in the 25% who suffer from mental illness.

Myth: They are dangerous.

Fact: Sometimes an encounter with the homeless may lead to a confrontation. In general, the homeless are among the least threatening group in our society. If anything, they are the victims of crime, not the perpetrators.

Most homeless people are not drunks or drug abusers or former mental patients. Many are able and willing to work. They are not the perpetual social problem many people believe they are. So who are they?

Full-time Workers

One out of four homeless is employed full- or part-time, according to the United States Conference of Mayors. The math is simple and frightening: a person who works forty hours a week at the 2006 Federal minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour grosses about \$885 a month, and after taxes, takes home about \$700 a month—and is a prime candidate for homelessness.

Disabled Vets

One quarter of the homeless are war veterans. Many of these veterans were abandoned or discouraged, even dishonored and wound up on our streets, some of them disabled, others mentally traumatized by their war experiences, others simply unable to find work.

Children

One out of four homeless people is a child. The fastest growing homeless group in the United States is families with Children. Their number nearly doubled between 2003 and 2005, and continues to grow with each passing day.

The Elderly

Elderly people on fixed incomes don't fit the traditional image of homeless folk. But the fact is that senior citizens who receive \$575 a month in benefits and pays \$350 for rent can't survive in any U.S. city. However, Social Security, Medicare, and other senior-oriented programs provide a safety net for many of the elderly, making their numbers disproportionately less among the homeless than other minorities.

AIDS Victims

Thirty-two thousand people with the AIDS and their dependents were homeless in 1999. By 2007 over 1,000,000 AIDS related suffers are projected to join their ranks.

Information Fast

*The number who are homeless for at least one night during the year is well over 5,000,000.

*The majority of homeless are male; the largest proportion is single men.

*Illegal immigrants are swelling the ranks of the homeless.

*One child in five lives below the poverty line, making children the poorest age group in the United States, which accounts for the growing percentage of children who are homeless.

*Many homeless people have completed high school; some have attended college and even graduate school.

*Millions are among the hidden homeless—people who are one crisis away from losing their homes. They may be doubled or tripled up in housing or 48 hours from eviction or about to leave a hospital or even prison with nowhere to go.

Educate yourself about the Homeless

You have already taken the first step toward your education about the homeless by reading this book. You've discovered that the homeless are more than the stereotypical drifter, drunk, or bum. A homeless person may be someone with a job, a runaway kid, a member of your family. Or you yourself.

You may already know the homeless in your community by sight. You may have spoken to them and may even know their names. Or you might have never noticed them at all. One of the first steps in helping people is to see them as individuals and to find out what they need.

Notice them; talk to them. Most are starved for attention. And contact your local church, social service agencies, or city hall to find the programs in your community that aid the homeless.

Don't be afraid to reach out—or to pass along what you have learned to others. You can start by sharing this book with a friend.

Respect the Homeless

What we are willing to do for the homeless people is to a large extent a matter of our attitude toward them. If you think that they are human debris, if you assume that they will always be living in the street and in shelters, you probably also believe that any help you might give would be a wasted effort. At worst, some people firmly believe that any help given only encourages indigence.

The first step in showing respect is to give homeless people the same courtesy and respect you would accord your friends, your family, or your employer. Treat them the way you would wish to be treated if you needed assistance.

Chapter Two

What to do when Confronted by the Homeless

You are walking down the street of your town when someone approaches you for coffee, a meal, or a bus ticket to a town where “there are relatives who will help.” How do you respond? What would you think at that moment? “She needs it more than I.” “Hey, fella, McDonalds is hiring!” “My heart says yes, ‘Give,’ but my head says, ‘Don’t be a fool.’” “I’ve already given five bucks this week. It’s starting to affect my budget.” “I help in other ways. I work at a shelter, support social agencies, and pay taxes.”

The world of the homeless is no doubt confusing. Not only do professionals and volunteers involved with the homeless wrestle with difficult questions such as these—so does the average person who is approached on a sidewalk, at a bus stop, on a park bench, or while walking down the street minding his own business.

Amazingly, we can make quite a difference in the lives of the homeless when we respond to them, rather than ignore or dismiss them. Try a kind word. Remember, their self confidence is nearly non-existent. Whatever we can say or do that gives them an iota of self-worth will have some benefit. However, there is one thing you are never to do, and that is give money directly to a homeless person. We will talk about this in the next few chapters. Buy them a sandwich and a soda, but don’t give them the money.

Carry Gift Certificates

We’ve all been panhandled for change to buy a cup of coffee or to get a bite to eat. If you’re like most, you’ve been suspicious from time to time, wondering what the money was really for. So, if you don’t want to take them to get a meal, carry a few gift certificates to McDonalds, Burger King, or your city’s sandwich shop. In this way, you don’t ignore someone who’s in need, but you know your funds are being used for food.

Carry a List of Shelters or Soup Kitchens

It is also a good idea to have a list of shelters and soup kitchens in your city, if you come in contact with the homeless regularly. In most major cities there already a list prepared. Call your local social service agency, shelter or homeless service agency. If by some chance there is not a list already published, take an hour and put one together for yourself.

Bring Food

Again, if you are in regular contact with the homeless bring an extra sandwich or two and give them to a homeless person. This in most cases will cost less than the above mentioned gift certificates. It only takes a minute to make an extra sandwich.

Living on the mean streets means being hungry. Without money to buy meals, homeless people are forced to rely on soup kitchens, and whatever they can get from passerby (you) or from rummaging through trash cans.

Chapter Three
Give to the Homeless

One of the most direct ways to aid the homeless is to give money. But not directly to the homeless person. Donations to organized charities and social service agencies that serve the homeless go a long way.

*Make a donation to an organization, church or other homeless agency. Do it in the memory of a late friend or in honor of someone.

*"Adopt" one charity and make regular or yearly donations.

*Help support neighborhood programs to aid the homeless.

Give Recyclables

Collecting recyclable cans and bottles is often the only "job" available to the homeless. But it is an honest job that requires initiative. You can help by saving your cans, bottles and even newspaper and giving them to a homeless person rather than taking them to the recycling center yourself.

Give Clothing

Next time you do your spring or fall cleaning, keep an eye out for those clothes that you no longer want or can't wear. If these items are in good shape, gather them together and donate them to a homeless service agency. Most shelters have a constant need for clothing that is in good shape. What is exciting is that most of us have closets that need to be cleaned out!

New clothing, particularly socks and underclothing can be purchased and donated to shelters. Besides, having something new to wear gives a psychological lift.

Give a Bag of Groceries

Have a food drive for the homeless. Load up a bag full of nonperishable groceries, such as canned goods, to donate. Encourage your neighbors and friends to participate as well.

If your community church doesn't have a food drive, organize one. Contact your local soup kitchens, shelters, and homeless service societies and ask what kind of food donations they would like. Give people in your congregation or community notice about the food drive and ask volunteers to help you collect the food and take it to the agency of your choice.

Give Toys

Children living in shelters have few if any possessions—including toys. Homeless parents have more urgent demands on what little money they may have, such as food and clothing. So, often these children have nothing to play with and little to occupy their time.

You can donate toys, books, and games to family shelters to distribute to homeless children. For Christmas ask your friends, co-workers, and family members to buy and wrap gifts for homeless children. Donate them to organizations or programs that reach homeless children.

Give Welcome Kits

Finding housing isn't the end of the matter for homeless people: usually they have no money or household items with which to furnish their new home. So they lack even the simplest necessities such as dishes, toilet paper, or towels.

To help them out make "welcome kits" that include everyday basics such as cups, a pot and pan, soap, shampoo, toothbrushes, etc. Just think of the minimal items you would need to get by with in a new home.

To distribute these "welcome kits," contact social services agencies or religious centers in your community that have programs to find housing for homeless people.

Give a Portion of Party Expenses

MAZON, a Los Angeles based national organization, encourages Jewish individuals and institutions to donate three percent (3%) of the cost of their bar mitzvah's, wedding celebrations,

or group sponsored meals. With more than 800 synagogues taking part, MAZON distributed \$1.5 million to the hungry and homeless in 2001.

We can do the same if we voluntarily taxed ourselves three percent (3%) of the total costs of our wedding, confirmation or baptismal celebrations and gave this money to the homeless. Any one who spends \$1,000 for a party can surely afford another \$30 for the homeless. And it can be any party—not necessarily a ceremonial occasion—a birthday, a New Year’s Eve party, or a Fourth of July picnic.

Such a gift will send a powerful message to our children and grandchildren.

Give this Book

You know that everyone’s efforts count when it comes to a problem such as homelessness. Now you can spread the word to your friends, colleagues, and family by giving them this book. Instead of sending holiday cards this year, send people on your list a copy of this book. You’ll be making a direct donation to Compassion in the Streets Ministries and other causes helping the homeless as well as informing others of the problem homelessness has become and encouraging them to become involved. As a last point, from the sales of this book, all funds go directly to Compassion in the Streets Ministries and other homeless agencies.

Chapter Four

Volunteer to Help the Homeless

Volunteer at a Shelter

As you have already learned, there are many kinds of shelters—for battered women, for the elderly, for children, for drug addicts, for single mothers, and for the homeless. As a volunteer, you have a wide choice. I mentioned the other shelters, because some of you may, by now have decided that a homeless ministry is not for you, but another ministry may be.

Shelters thrive on the work of volunteers, from those who sign people in, to those who serve meals, and to others who counsel the homeless on where to get social services. For the homeless, a shelter can be as little as a place to sleep out of the weather or as much as a step forward to self-sufficiency. A concerned volunteer can make a good deal of difference in their lives.

People who serve in shelters report that they have found it to be not only a spiritual moment, but also a time when their own burdens are lightened and their personal strength and courage are bolstered. I have personally felt a strong sense of God's presence at shelters and in the streets—wherever men, women, and children gather to feed, clothe, and protect those in need of all three.

Volunteer at a Soup Kitchen

Soup kitchens provide one of the basics of life, nourishing meals for the homeless and other disadvantaged members of the community. Volunteers generally do much of the work, including picking up donations of food, preparing meals, serving meals and cleaning up after the meals are complete.

Volunteer your Talents

No matter what you do for a living, you can help the homeless with your on-the-job talents and skills. This with clerical skills can help nonprofit organizations and charities that reach the

homeless. Doctors, psychiatrists, counselors, and dentists can treat the homeless in clinics. Lawyers can help with the legal concerns. The homeless' needs are great—your time and talents will not be wasted.

Volunteer your Hobbies

Every one of us has something we can give the homeless. Wherever our interests may lie—cooking, repairing, photography—we can use them for the homeless. Through our hobbies, we can teach them useful skill.

Volunteer for Follow-up Programs

A room, an apartment, or house is not enough unless there is also food, counseling, employment, medical care, and education. Some homeless people, particularly those who have been on the street for a while, may need help with fundamentals tasks such as paying bills, a household budget, or cleaning.

Follow-up programs to give formerly homeless further advice, counseling and other services need volunteers. Check with your local social service agencies, religious centers, and transitional housing groups to see what programs are in place and how your talents and skills can be used. If nothing exists in your area, contact social services to find out how you can start one.

Tutor Homeless Children

The stress of being homeless isn't only on the adults in the family—the children reflect it, too. And it can affect their school performance—if they attend school at all. It's easy for these youngsters to fall behind their classmates in learning—often resulting in a decision to give up trying.

A tutor can make all the difference. Just having adult attention can spur children to do their best.

Volunteer Job Training

The homeless may often lack job skills, or skills that would be useful currently. Contact your local social service agencies and see how you can help to train the homeless.

If you own or manage a company or business, hire the homeless and offer them training in your industry.

Chapter Five
Get Others Involved

If you do volunteer work with the homeless, you can become an enthusiast and extend your enthusiasm to others. How can you infect others with your own sense of devotion?

*By recognizing that your work with the homeless has not only educated you, it has empowered you to speak with authority.

*By writing letters to the editors and articles on the topic for local papers and by participating in paid advertising. All help to shape public opinions.

*By pressing housing issues at election time. Fund raising events present particularly effective moments for educating candidates, who have the power to promote affordable housing and other measures to help the homeless.

Educate Your Children about the Homeless

If we hope to aid the homeless, we must educate as many others about the situation as we can. And what a better place to start than at home—teaching your own children?

Tell your children what you have learned and help them to see the homeless as people. If you do volunteer work, take your children with you so they can meet the homeless people and see what can be done to help them. With older children, volunteer as a family. Suggest they sort through the toys, books, and clothes they no longer use and donate them to shelters or organizations that assist the poor and homeless.

Sign Up Your Company or School

Ask your company or school to host fund-raising events, such as silent auctions or craft sales, using co-workers or other students for volunteer assistance, and donate the proceeds to nonprofit organizations that aid the homeless.

You can also ask your company or school to match whatever funds you and your co-workers or friends can raise or are willing to donate for causes to help the homeless.

Recruit Local Businesses

One of the easiest ways to involve local businesses is to organize food and/or clothing drives to aid organizations that reach the homeless. These are the steps involved:

- *Contact your local shelter or other organizations that aid the homeless and ask the type of food and clothing they need.
- *Approach local grocery or clothing stores about setting up containers on their premises in which people can drop off donations. Give a time frame for the drive. Remember that the longer the drive, the more volunteer help will be needed.
- *Ask the businesses to donate goods to the drive.
- *Publicize the drive by placing announcements in local papers and on community bulletin boards and by placing signs and posters around your neighborhood.

Ask Your Clergy to Help

Among the various good works your clergy should be involved in are programs to help the homeless. Ask them to get involved in community efforts to aid the homeless. Point out specific programs you may have uncovered. Suggest that the congregation become involved.

Suggest Your Congregation offer Tithes

If you regularly attend church, you might suggest to the congregation that at a specific service each month all loose change and bills offered in the collection plate be given to a homeless ministry. Talk to the congregation and suggest that they adopt a homeless ministry to give to on a regular basis.

Create Lists of Needed Donations

Most nonprofit organizations that aid the homeless can use donations of food, clothing and in some cases furniture, appliance, and other supplies. Often they don't have the means to make their needs widely known or to organize drives to bring donations in.

Call the organizations in your community that aid the homeless—the shelters, the halfway houses, the mobile food units, the food pantries, the relocation programs—and ask them what supplies they need on a regular basis. Make a list for each organization, along with its address, telephone number, and the name of the contact person.

Then mail these lists to community organizations that may wish to help with donations: churches, associations such as the American Legion, Rotary Club, or Moose, local businesses, schools, and children's organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.

Chapter Six

What Children Can Do

They can Teach their Friends

Just as you can be an advocate for the homeless, so can your children. Ask them to tell their friends what you have taught them about helping the homeless. If your family does volunteer work, bring some or your children's friends to watch.

Chapter Seven
Really Make a Commitment

Employ the Homeless

Help Wanted

General office work. Welfare recipient, parolee,
ex-addict or homeless OK. Good wages and will train.

That's the way that many help wanted ads should read. Invite the homeless and/or "unemployable" to learn to work. Best of all—the ad works. Most people who would respond to an ad such as the above, will find permanent, well-paying jobs, often in maintenance, construction, clerical, housekeeping, and many other jobs.

Many of the homeless want to work, but lack the opportunity. Some are unskilled, others aren't. All are looking for a chance. Whether you use a homeless training program to hire someone, or employ a person in your business through a shelter, you both benefit. Remember, 25% of the people in shelters do work part or full time and most of those who don't, are willing and able to.

Help the Homeless Apply for Aid

Governmental aid is available for homeless people, but many may not know where to find it or how to apply. Since they don't have a mailing address, governmental agencies may not be able to reach them.

You can help by directing the homeless to intermediaries, such as shelters or organizations associated like Catholic Charities, that let them know what aid is available and help them apply for it. If you want to be an advocate or intermediary for the homeless yourself, you can contact these organizations as well.

Often what is needed is a combination of a homeless person who wants to be helped and an individual who cares enough to get involved and persevere. That combination

produces incredible results. It explodes the tired stereotype that homeless people do not want to be helped. And it proves that every one of us can make a difference.

Chapter Eight

Help to End Homelessness

Resources

National

1. Coalition for the homeless
500 Eight Ave.
New York, NY 10018
212-736-6437
2. The Ford Foundation
320 East 43 Street
New York, NY 10017
3. Habitat for Humanity
121 Habitat Street
Americus, GA 31709-3498
901-924-6935
4. Homeless Information Exchange
1830 Connecticut Ave.
Washington, D.C. 20009
202-462-7551
5. Legal Action Center for the Homeless
220 E. 44th. Street
New York, NY 10009
212-59-4240
6. The National Alliance to End Homelessness
1518 K. Street, NW

Suite 206

Washington, D.C. 20005

202-638-6388

7. National Coalition for the Homeless

1621 Connecticut Ave., NW

Washington, D.C. 20006

202-659-8411

8. National Interfaith Hospitality Network

121 Morris Ave.

Summit, NJ 07901

908-273-1100

9. The Partnership for the Homeless

305 Seventh Ave.

New York, NY 10001

2121-645-3444

10. Salvation Army

799 Bloomfield Ave.

Verona, NJ 07044

201-239-0606

11. Travelers Aid International

1001 Connecticut Ave.

Washington, D.C. 20036

202-659-9468

Memphis and Surroundings Area

1. Agape Child and Family Services

111 Racine St.

Memphis, TN 38111

901-323-3600

2. Alliance for the Mentally Ill of Memphis

3245 Central Ave.

Memphis, TN 38111

901-323-5928

3. Alpha Omega Veterans Service Drop-in Service Center and Transitional Shelter

1183 Madison Ave.

Memphis, TN 38014

901-726-5066

4. Bethany House (For the Pregnant)

901 Chelsea Ave.

Memphis, TN 38107

901-525-1837

5. Catholic Charities Homeless Program

1325 Jefferson Ave.

Memphis, TN 38104

901-722-4777

6. The Church Health Center

1200 Peabody Ave.

Memphis, TN 38014

901-272-0003

7. Estival Communities

379 Cossitt

Memphis, TN

901-529-4515

8. Memphis Interfaith Hospitality Network

200 E. Parkway

Memphis, TN 38112

901-452-6446

9. Lighthouse Mission Ministries

3630 Jackson Ave.

Memphis, TN 38108

901-382-0966

10. Greater Memphis Inter-Agency Coalition for the Homeless

2670 Union Ave.

Memphis, TN 38112

Suite 818

901-327-4300

11. Friends for Life

1384 Madison Ave.

Memphis, TN 38104

901-272-0855

For a complete list of shelters and soup kitchens in the Memphis and surrounding areas you may call Compassion in the Streets Ministries at 901-465-2304 or write them at 770 Helene Dr. Arlington, TN 38002.

Remember that the homeless citizens of America have the same civil rights as the rest of us.

You may also help the homeless in the Memphis and surrounding area by purchasing a copy of this book for you and for your friends and families. All proceeds will help fund Compassion in the Streets Ministries (CITS). Eighty five percent of funds they receive go directly to serving the homeless. The remaining 15% goes into the administrative fund. CITS has no employees. It is a completely volunteer ministry and no salaries are paid .

To purchase a copy of this book contact

Compassion in the Streets Ministries

770 Helene Dr.

Arlington, TN 38002

or call

901-465-2304

Each book costs

\$5.00

If you can't afford the book please call our office.

If you would like to volunteer to help

Compassion in the Streets Ministries

Call us at

901-465-2304