

Caring for the Homeless with the Theology of the Cross

A Brief Protocol for Dealing with the Homeless

The Setting: Your Congregation. The Situation: A Homeless Person Asks for Aid.

Your congregation wants to help those in need. Here's a simple checklist of considerations to get you started.

What is your goal?

Reach the lost with the Word of God. Share the mercy of Christ with your neighbors, body and soul.

What is your role?

Be present for your neighbors, showing them the mercy of Christ. The church is to be a place of refuge. Your neighbors should know they will find someone who cares in the church with words and action. The extent of that action will be different in each congregation, depending on the resources we have been given.

Initial Visit

Gather General information from the care-seeker

Full Name

Birth Date

How long have you been homeless?

Where do you stay?

What religion are you?

Do you have a church home? Did you go to church as a child?

Do you have family in the area? Who are your support people?

How can we help you? What do you hope to gain here?

(Get a copy of photo ID, if the individual has one.)

After these questions are answered, it may be a good time to let the individual know why the church is here, why we desire to help and what can be expected from us.

If the staff person conducting the interview is not the pastor, this would be a good time to call the pastor in to meet and pray. If repeat visits are likely, follow-up with an assessment (either same day or at the next visit). Keep a confidential file on those who request aid.

Boundaries

Establish clear boundaries from the beginning and be firm. Gain and keep control of the interaction.

Don't allow the visit to be driven by the individual's desperation or sense of urgency. Don't be pressured into giving assistance without taking the necessary time to consider the request.

Attempts should be made to verify the information you are given, especially if you are considering granting a request for something of value. Never give cash and be cautious about giving anything that

can be sold or returned to the store. If someone becomes aggressive, demanding cash, they may become dangerous. Have a plan with your staff in case things escalate.

Assessment

Observe and inquire regarding the following:

Addiction
Mental Health
Physical Health

Other useful questions to ask at this time:

Do you have a criminal record?
Do you have any outstanding warrants?
Are you in any danger? Are you being victimized? Do you sell your body?

Making a Plan

Addiction

Tell me about your biggest trouble (or pain/suffering).
Do you use drugs to help cope with the pain and suffering you experience?
How often do you use?
What do you use?
How do you get it (or how do you get money for it)?
What happens to you if you don't have your drug?

Know the addiction treatment facilities in your area (both residential and outpatient) and what their referral and admission procedures are. Be prepared to have the individual refuse treatment even if he/she admits to being addicted. However, if he knows you care and are trustworthy, he may come to you when ready. When someone enters treatment, stay connected if possible, continuing with spiritual care during recovery.

If the individual refuses a treatment plan, consider limiting assistance so as not to enable, while remaining present for spiritual counsel and the development of a trusting relationship.

If individuals use your restrooms or are in/around your building unsupervised, you may want to obtain naloxone (Narcan nasal spray), if possible. Check with your local county health department or addiction treatment agencies.

Mental Health

If the individual has a mental health diagnosis, he may also have case management through a mental health agency. It can be helpful to make contact with the case manager, if the individual allows. Find out what the case manager handles so you aren't duplicating efforts. It's also good to have the case manager's contact info on file. You may need their help with the individual at some point. (They may also need your help).

If there is no diagnosis but you suspect a mental health issue, encourage the individual to get evaluated. Know the mental health agencies that take individuals with Medicaid (or no insurance) and the process for getting an appointment. Be prepared for the individual to be offended at the suggestion that he may need mental health care. Reassure him that we all need mental health care at times; even simply being depressed is a mental health issue. We need to take care of our mental health just like our physical health, etc.

If possible, attend a Mental Health First Aid class (mentalhealthfirstaid.org). “Just as CPR helps you assist an individual having a heart attack, Mental Health First Aid helps you assist someone experiencing a mental health or substance use-related crisis.”

Know the suicide hotline numbers.

Physical Health

When was the last time you were seen by a doctor?

Do you have a primary care doctor? If so, who is it?

Do you have any diagnosis that needs prescription medication? If so, are you able to get the medication and do you take it as instructed?

Know the closest health care centers that take Medicaid or if there are any clinics/medical centers that will see individuals without insurance.

Health Insurance

Does the individual have health insurance? If not, connect him to an agency that will help him apply. Or, you can help him apply online. Check first to see if he has the documents needed (photo ID, proof of income, etc.).

Government Photo ID

Government photo ID is required for most services. If the individual doesn't have a current ID it may be necessary to start by acquiring a birth certificate (this can be done online for a fee) and a social security card. Check with local BMV for a list of required documents.

Outstanding Warrants in the Court System

Warrants will disqualify an individual from some services. It's also just good practice to make dealing with these a priority. However, it's usually difficult to convince people to turn themselves in. It can be helpful to be present with them at the police station and court appearances. If you consider driving someone to a location do what is necessary to ensure personal safety.

In some states/counties, you can access court records online. It may be a good idea to look up the individual's record.

Domestic Violence

Know the domestic violence shelters and the admission process.

Refer to the LCMS website for guidance, lcms.org/social-issues/domestic-violence.

Prostitution/Human Trafficking

This is common with women (and sometimes men) who are drug addicted and homeless. There may be agencies in your area that assist with rescuing individuals from human trafficking. Refer to the LCMS website for guidance, lcms.org/social-issues/human-trafficking.

Also, the website *humantraffickinghotline.org* has information and a directory to search for agencies by city/state.

Resource List

Keep an updated resource list, a list of agencies to which you can refer individuals or which you can contact yourself for guidance and assistance. Try to find resources in your area that assist in the following areas:

- Addiction/Substance Abuse Treatment
- Benefits Assistance (Medicaid, Food Stamps, etc.)
- Birth Certificates and ID's
- Clothing and Household Goods
- Domestic Violence
- Employment and Job Training Services
- Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens
- Homeless Shelters
- Homeless Ministries and Agencies
- Human Trafficking/Prostitution
- Transitional Housing
- Legal Services
- Re-entry Services (for those released from prison)
- Medical and Dental Health Care Centers
- Mental Health
- Counseling Services
- Suicide Hotline
- Veteran Services
- Youth Services

The above protocol provides a broad list of what mercy-givers need to know. It also lists the kind of care homeless persons commonly need. The list is not exclusive nor is it prescriptive. Our goal is to provide a sense of what caregivers to the homeless in a parochial setting need to consider and how they can help.