

What's the best way to help the homeless?

Former homeless people share their advice

SFGate, by Katie Dowd, Wednesday, November 23, 2016

San Franciscans encounter homelessness every day. On our walk to work, on public transit, even outside of our homes. And it's hard to pass people in need constantly, but it's also hard to know how to fix such an overwhelming problem.

One user on Reddit was curious how to help, and their simple question, "Former homeless people of reddit, what can we do to help homeless people the most?," now has over 2,300 comments offering suggestions.

The entire thread is worth a look; it's full of thoughtful responses and interesting conversations. But the thing that stands out the most — other than the heartbreaking family circumstances that so often led to homelessness in teen users — is the kindness of strangers.

"When people ask homeless what do you need, they are thinking about objects, things like hats, sock and gloves or any other things useful in routine life. These objects make a small difference," one user wrote. "But the most important things are not objects. Things that make most impact and helps someone are non-objects. Dignity. Kindness and understanding. Encouragement."

"I lived in my car for 3 months and the only part that wore on my sanity was feeling different and looked down on by everyone that could see my situation," user name76 wrote, echoing the sentiments of many other posters. "Physical needs weren't that hard to meet."

If you want to learn more about homelessness in San Francisco, a great place to start is the Chronicle's homelessness project page. On it, you'll find dozens of stories addressing the problems, myths and possible solutions.

To hear more advice from former homeless people themselves on how to help, read their stories [in the gallery above] below:

"There needs to be more opportunities for homeless or otherwise desperate people to do community oriented work. Where I live there used to be a program that had street people volunteering to pick up trash and hang holiday decorations and such. It was only for an hour or two at a time and in exchange they got access to laundry and showers and such, in addition to a daily meal available for all.

"People don't realize that the toughest part of being homeless isn't going without food. Of all the struggles, food is the easiest. Other things, like bathing, sleeping, s-----g, are a little tougher, but you learn to take care of your needs fairly quickly. It's the time that gets you. You're outside, somewhat uncomfortable, maybe asking for handouts, being told to move along, get a job, etc, for hours and hours. Feeling totally useless messes with your head. The idea of getting wasted is very appealing. You start to resent "housies." Other homeless people are the only ones you relate to. It becomes a trap. If you don't have a safety net out there you eventually lose any desire to rejoin society.

"So just about any low pressure activity would be really helpful for homeless people to snap out of their rut and build some kind of connection to the community." — moreLSDplease

"I think the best help happens through organizations. It's hard to get out of homelessness because each piece a person is missing (a place to live, an income, etc.) makes obtaining all the rest more difficult.

"Individual contributions can be helpful, but none of them are the solution. People don't panhandle for change to put a down payment on an apartment. Offering food or socks is appreciated, and certainly a good thing to do. But if you want to help people get out of the situation, only charities or public programs are equipped to provide the holistic support people need."
— *trebuchetfight*

"I was not homeless for very long, and I had some money, but was not going to blow it on a hotel when I had a perfectly good car and could hide it for the night down rural streets in my hometown.

"I went to Walmart and needed to buy a hat, gloves and thicker socks, as well as some food. My friend's mom saw me there, and somehow she got me to talk about what was going on in my situation. She listened and asked a few questions. Very sweet and kind lady. She told me a story about how she went through something similar. She then INSISTED on purchasing my cart for me. It wasn't much, but I will never forget it."
— *Starkohren*

"When I was homeless, it would have been nice if it was made clear the options that were available in regards to finding housing etc. It would have been good to be able to use somewhere as an address for registering for benefits and things like that as I had such a hard time getting my money every fortnight, I was lucky in that I had someone whose address I could use but that could have ended at any time."
— *ramona1987*

"It's community things that help best, I find. I got put on a program for homeless teens where someone came and checked on me every week and took me to a community house thing. We'd do things like learn simple practical or social skills like learning how to cook and fix things or learning how to tie a tie. They'd talk to us and build up friendly relationships. They never tried preaching to us or anything, we were never forced to join in, we could spend the day just being there and watching everything if we wanted. But they treated us like people so everyone always did something.

"I didn't really realize it at the time, but looking back that extreme amount of kindness helped a lot. People who didn't know me went out of their way to help me and make sure I was alright just out of the kindness of their heart."
— *BlueCarmine*

"I was 18, finally leaving abusive parents. I could only get part time work, and it just wasn't enough to have a roof over my head and food at the same time. A thing that really helped me was this wonderful woman who came up to me while I was panhandling in the rain - she gave me a backpack, and a heavy wool coat. The backpack was full of socks, gloves, hand-warmers, a beanie, toiletries, and a letter from her saying everything would be OK.
"In one fell swoop, she gave me warmth, and dignity."
— *Capt_Gingerbeard*

"My boyfriend was homeless for a period of his life because of an abusive parent. He was lucky enough to have friends and family that helped to pull him out of his situation, but it obviously had a huge impact on how he lives his life.

"He always carries a few pre-made packs with toothpaste and a toothbrush, deodorant, disposable razors and shaving cream, socks, hand/feet warmers, etc. When he sees someone who needs help he gives them a pack and cash if he has it on him.

"But the best and most truly invaluable thing he does for the homeless people he meets is he stops and has a real conversation with them. He listens and shares stories and treats them with respect and dignity...

"He always tells me that it's not the money people need, it's normalcy. A daily routine and normal social interaction. Brushing your teeth, combing your hair, saying hello to your neighbor, and spending your day doing normal things and feeling normal. Too many cannot find this normalcy and so they turn to drugs and alcohol to escape their reality. Because they think they'll never feel normal again." — jproxduh

"Don't just throw money at them. When I was on the street, a guy came up to me and gave me a tube of toothpaste and a toothbrush. I really needed them but the change people gave me went towards food because it was a necessity. It was amazing and he stopped by and had a chat with me. He understood what I needed and it made my day." — iamprocrastinating

"I was somewhat homeless, as in I was living in cheap hotels. It was not uncommon that I checked out of one hotel and couldn't check in to the next for several hours. Sometimes I drove from one city to another and pulled over to take a nap. Nothing scared the s--- out of me like someone banging on my window. The person would say they were just seeing if I was okay ... I was, but you might have just given me a f----- heart attack." — shrinkingviolet219

"I was homeless a few years ago for a couple months. I was quite lucky in that I was very resourceful and street smart as well as clean and sober. I slept on the beach sometimes and in an underground parking lot other times. I eventually figured out the shelter system and that helped me get better access to food and resources. I remember getting help with free food like day old bread and free fruit/sandwiches etc as well as free clothes and I was grateful for all of it.

"What I remember most though are the people who saw past the mental illness, past the skittish, scared girl and into the human being underneath. The hotel clerk who let me charge my phone and gave me free coffee, no strings attached; the police officer who told me about shelters instead of writing me a ticket; and the shelter worker who chatted with me about some silly show on tv.

"I always remember those people and when I now work with homeless and disadvantaged people I always look for their humanity even when it is hard to find." — Pyid

Looking to contribute financially this holiday season? You may consider the Chronicle's Season of Sharing Fund. One-hundred percent of donations go straight to locals on the brink of homelessness.

For more information, visit seasonofsharing.org.