

# bethesda cares

## Panhandlers and You

Have you ever been approached and asked if you could spare some change? Asked if you could help someone get some food to eat? Asked for bus money? Many of us give change if we have it, give change because we feel sorry for the person, give change because we feel guilty or because we want to help the person. Have you ever felt frustrated, disappointed or sad when you see the same person asking for money day in and day out? How is the spare change really helping? Is giving to panhandlers the answer?

Our experience at Bethesda Cares is that panhandling is not the answer and here are some reasons why: panhandling doesn't provide benefits like insurance, it is not steady or reliable income, it creates a dependence on others, and is a cycle that is hard to break even if someone doesn't intend to do it very long. Panhandling often goes to feeding an addiction be it gambling, alcohol or drugs. It diminishes the dignity of the individual.

Giving change to panhandlers does not solve the problems the person is facing and can often prolong the problem. We don't know what the people needs just from looking at them. Someone asking for some change may need food, may need housing, an addictions program, counseling, health care, clothing, and the list goes on and on. Panhandling is the symptom; to address it we need to know the individual. Usually the person panhandling isn't addressing these issues. At Bethesda Cares, we work together with the homeless to address their problems and seek solutions to move them toward stability.

What is the answer, sadly there is no easy answer but there are ways of giving that can help move people in the direction of stability. The first is don't give money. If you want to give to the individual, consider buying food or coffee. There are wallet size drop cards available from Bethesda Cares that give homeless information on where to get food and services. Drop this in the cup instead of change. Then make a contribution to one or more of the agencies that work with the homeless, learn about the issues and help advocate for change. Volunteer your time with one of the agencies, contact the Montgomery County Volunteer and Community Service Center to find the match for your time and talents. In this way you will truly be giving a hand up not a hand out.

As an outreach program for the homeless, we go out on the street to meet clients. Call us if you are concerned about an individual. Also, we are available to come to your office to speak to your staff about panhandling, responsible giving and working safely. Contact Sue Kirk or John Mendez at 301/907-9244.