

For February 5, 2013

The growing homeless and transient population problem in Fortuna and Humboldt County is a complex issue not to mention an emotional one.

There are people and families in need. No doubt about that. Fortunately, we have agencies in Humboldt County that provide services to those that want them.

But what about the people who CHOOSE a transient and houseless lifestyle?

A recent cleanup of a sophisticated and illegal camping site along the banks of the Eel River just outside Fortuna City Limits collected massive amounts of garbage and debris. Because it's outside the city limits on County property, this long-standing encampment and major health hazard is not something the City of Fortuna can address.

Are there solutions to these problems caused by our increased homeless and transient population? We do not advocate denying people in need of food, clothing and shelter. So what can we do?

In Fortuna, the City is in the midst of putting together a NO CAMPING ordinance that would give the police department a set of concrete laws to uphold. The proposed ordinance generally prohibits open fires and camping on public and private property. While the ordinance does not tackle panhandling, it does deal with the sticky private property dilemma that Fortuna

faces. Absent landlords have not responded to the influx of transient inhabitants on their property. With the passage of this ordinance, the City can.

There is one solution that many of us agree on—including River Life Foundation, the City of Fortuna and the Fortuna Chamber of Commerce—DO NOT GIVE MONEY TO PANHANDLERS. It doesn't help and it DOES make things worse. The sad truth is many of the panhandlers are scamming us. And, when a panhandler finds a successful location, the chances increase that they aren't going to leave any time soon and so the scam continues.

Recently in Willits, I saw a sign at Safeway that said "A Handout is Not Helping" and I couldn't agree more.

Many of us were brought up to show compassion for those less fortunate. Giving money to panhandlers can seem like a natural extension of that compassion.

It is NOT. And, if a panhandler ever makes you feel unsafe in Fortuna, please call the police. Be prepared to give them a description of the person who disturbed you. The police WILL respond and will take a complaint of this type seriously.

Instead of giving a handout to a panhandler, please consider donating money to the organizations that support those in need—whether it's food for people, Fortuna Community Services, or the Rescue Mission--any number of organizations. Don't know who to contact? This month, the United Way will launch a 211 Service. That's all you have to remember—2-1-1.

The 2-1-1 service will connect local residents to health and human services that include basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, childcare, physical and mental health resources, health insurance assistance, employment, and more. They can also direct you on how to make a donation to these services.

Panhandling and transient camping is taking a toll on our community and our businesses. You have the power to help stop it. **DON'T GIVE MONEY TO PANHANDLERS. PERIOD.** Call 211—find out where you can send a donation where it counts or even find out where you can volunteer to help those in need.

This is Erin Dunn, CEO of the Fortuna Chamber of Commerce