

I met a man on the street outside my church one day. He had just been laid off from his sales job. Larry was a constantly upbeat young man and was confident that he'd have a new job within a few days. That didn't materialize and he quickly found his meagre savings drained. I tried to connect him to some of the services available to him, but he kept saying that he'd be back on his feet soon and he'd survive a few nights living outdoors. Not long after that I ran across him standing on a corner holding a cardboard sign with the words, "Anything helps," scribbled on it. "I'm just raising funds for some new clothes," he told me. I offered him free access to The Salvation Army's clothing closet, which is set up to help people who can't afford new clothing. He just smiled and said he was earning his own way right now, so no thanks. He also confided that he planned to keep going until he had enough change to get a room for a night or two. "Just enough to stay out of the cold for a bit." I reminded him there were resources to help him get a place permanently, but he waved me off with his usual smile, saying he had it all under control. I never did see new clothes on him, but I did see Larry regularly after that. "I'm working," he'd tell me, as he stood with a cup and his sign of the day. The message changed, sometimes saying he needed work, sometimes food, and sometimes the not-really-funny message: "I won't lie, it's for beer." But he always ended with those two words: Anything helps. Larry was less than 30 when I met him. Clean cut, clean shaven, and clean and sober. But life on the street is hard and dangerous. One night he was awakened by a man stabbing a knife into his chest. For a week Larry slept indoors as a guest at the local hospital. I reminded him again and again that there were resources to help him be fed, clothed, and housed and that using them would help him get back on his feet. "Don't worry, Roger," he would say, with that big smile of his. "I've got this." Back on the street, and now suffering regular pain from his injury, he began to self-medicate beyond the occasional beer. The small supply of pain meds given to him by the hospital ran out quickly and Larry began to buy more on the street. The money going into his cup never went towards nights indoors any more. He had always kept up his appearance, but he no longer had regular access to showers and seemed to stop visiting the laundromat except to dry out his sleeping bag. This wasn't an overnight process – it stretched out over a year. There were two consistent threads that ran through the whole thing though: One was that there were and are community resources available for everything that my friend needed. The second was that he continued to turn them down in favor of those two words on his sign: anything helps. None of the money people gave him ever did anything to help Larry. As long as he thought he could get by, he never did anything to get out. Christmas is a time of giving, but let me encourage you to give wisely. A dollar given to help someone sustain their poverty never helps them, but that same dollar in the hands of an agency which can teach them to overcome their poverty can change a life.