

This is Lieutenant Roger McCort from The Salvation Army in Eureka with today's Community Comment.

I run the largest organized panhandling event in Humboldt County each year. As The Salvation Army, I put red kettles out every Christmas. Only the Girl Scouts rival our operation, and since I don't give you Thin Mints in exchange for your donation, they certainly raise more.

Because of this, and my staunch advocacy of helping people who are homeless get out of poverty, it surprises some that I believe we need to outlaw panhandling.

Some think asking passersby for money is a civil liberty issue. They argue that this isn't about begging, but about working to survive. Advocates say it's a way for the largely invisible homeless subclass to be seen and pay their own way. What better way for people to directly help than to hand a few dollars right to the person living on the street? Supporters often go on to suggest that any regulation or ban on panhandling only hurts the poor and criminalizes homelessness.

From my perspective, permitting panhandling is dehumanizing; and encouraging it is, at best, enabling.

While we hear stories about street beggars who go home to their mansion at night, this is hardly the truth for most people. Pining down how much the average panhandler can make is difficult, but there have been a number of studies done. Most say someone will bring in a little more than the minimum wage every hour. That equates to between thirty and a hundred dollars a day, depending on how long they work at it, whether they get moved along by the police, and how the weather shapes the day. On a good day, it might be enough to get a room for the night or enough fast food to make it through the day, but not both, especially once you add in any other expenses, such as laundry, camping gear, smokes, pet food, drugs, and alcohol.

How, exactly, is that helping anyone?

Providing someone with exactly the amount of money it takes to keep them outside on the street does them no good. It keeps them right where they are at, standing on that corner like some kind of twisted art exhibit. Is that what it means to be seen? Not in any meaningful way. This kind of existence is like an animal being seen in a zoo. They may have what they need to live, but the cage is still there around them.

When panhandling is made illegal and law enforcement takes that seriously, panhandlers move to cities that allow them to continue OR they turn to the system which is in place to help them get off the streets. There are dozens of agencies who exist just to help people get off the street.

No one needs to sleep rough, and often someone's willingness to get into a shelter is the step required to get them into the system which can put them indoors permanently.

No one needs to go hungry. There are feeding programs, food pantries, churches, and others who are ready and willing to provide meals to those who come in.

And every one of those places can provide referrals or assistance to help people deal with their housing problems, employment problems, addiction recovery, and life rebuilding, if the person coming in will allow them to.

Do you want to really help someone? Don't encourage their panhandling. Instead, point them towards real help. You can even give them my card.

Grace and peace to you. This has been Lt. Roger McCort with today's KINS Community Comment.