



National Coalition for the Homeless

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How YOU Can Help End Homelessness

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While the causes and solutions to homelessness are complex, there is much that an individual or community group can do to help. No matter what your skills, interests, age, or resources, there are ways you can make a difference for some of the men, women, and children who are homeless. Volunteer work, advocacy efforts, financial or material contributions, and continued self-education are all important and needed as we work our way to a solution. Some suggestions are listed below.

VOLUNTEER

Volunteering your time to work directly with people experiencing homelessness is one of the best ways to learn about homelessness and help to meet immediate needs at the same time. There is a lot of “behind the scenes” work (filing, sorting clothes, cutting vegetables, etc.) to be done at shelters and other direct service agencies. Think about what you do best and the kind of setting in which you work most effectively—with individuals or groups, with men, women, or children, and so on. Then, call a few places, ask what help they need, and arrange for a visit. You can find a partial listing of service providers on NCH's Directory of Local Homeless Service Organizations at <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/local/local.html>.

Be patient—many service providers are under-funded and understaffed. Staff members are often overwhelmed with trying to meet people's basic needs or coping with emergencies. Let them know how you can help, when, and for how long, and give them time to figure out how to work you in. Remember that service providers need help at all times of year—not just holidays—and will appreciate regular volunteers who can be counted on to show up. At the same time, don't commit to more than one visit or task until you're sure you have found a place to which you are able to make a long-term commitment.

Here are some ways you might help:

- Work at a shelter. Take an evening or overnight shift. Help with clerical work such as answering phones, typing, filing, or sorting mail. Serve food, wash dishes, or sort and distribute clothes.

- Help build or fix up houses or shelters. Check with your local public housing authority, or find the nearest chapter of Habitat for Humanity by calling (800) 422-4828 or visiting <http://www.habitat.org>.
- Offer professional skills directly or assist in job training. Direct service providers may be able to use many services and skills, including secretarial, catering, plumbing, accounting, management, carpentry, public relations, fundraising, legal, medical, dentistry, writing, child care, counseling, tutoring, or mentoring.
- Share hobbies. Teach your hobbies to a group of people staying at a homeless shelter. Ask them about their hobbies and have them teach you.
- Invite people experiencing homelessness to a community event. Invite people who are experiencing homelessness to a worship service, public concert or picnic, city council meeting, etc.
- Organize an event at a shelter. Plan an evening program such as a board game or chess night, an open mike poetry reading, a guest storytelling or musical performance, or a holiday party.
- Work with children. Assist program directors that are coordinating events such as field trips, picnics or art workshops for children staying in homeless shelters. Find out if there are children who could benefit from tutors or mentors.
- Involve others! Convince your classmates, co-workers, church/synagogue members, or civic club to join or support your efforts.

ADVOCATE

Advocacy is critical to creating the systemic changes needed to end homelessness. Advocacy means working with people experiencing homelessness to bring about positive changes in policies and programs on the local, state, and federal levels. It means working with various sectors of the community (e.g. city/county officials, members of Congress, direct service providers, and the business community) to develop workable strategies for responding to homelessness. It also means changing your language and behaviors in small ways that may contribute to larger changes in the way people experiencing homelessness are seen and treated in our society.

Here are some ways you might help:

- Get connected to a coalition. Volunteer at your local, state, or national housing or homeless advocacy coalition, or make a financial contribution to support their work. For the name of the coalition nearest you, see NCH's Directory of Homeless & Housing Advocacy Coalitions at <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/state/>.
- Respond to NCH's Legislative Alerts. These alerts give the most up-to-date information about what is happening in Congress affecting homelessness and poverty on a national level, and what you can do about it. To receive or follow NCH's legislative alerts, visit <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/alerts.html>. Then write letters, call, or visit public officials at the city, county, state and federal levels asking what they are doing about homelessness and/or mentioning relevant legislation. When legislators receive more than

a few visits or letters about any subject, they sit up and take notice. Personal visits are the most powerful; letters and phone calls are next. However, the power of email and fax are replacing that of written letters due to the fact that stamped mail is being phased out in Congress due to security concerns following the post 9/11 terrorist attacks. No matter what method of communication you choose, it is important to tell them your feelings and experiences. Addresses for public officials are available at the local library or on the Internet at www.house.gov and www.senate.gov.

To call anyone in Congress: Capitol Switchboard (202) 224-3121.

- Follow local politics. Attend neighborhood and public meetings and speak up in favor of low-income housing, group homes, shelters, and homelessness prevention programs.
- Educate your leaders. Organize site visits for political leaders and the media to visit local homeless programs to highlight ways that your community is successfully addressing the many problems associated with homelessness.
- Involve the media. Call or write the media to inform them of your concern for people experiencing homelessness in your area. Write editorials when important issues related to homelessness arise in your community.
- Encourage those most directly involved to advocate. Encourage people experiencing homelessness, agency volunteers, and staff to contact officials at all levels of government. Use opportunities like special holiday meals to do this—provide paper, pens, stamped envelopes, and sample messages at every meeting and event. Have a "Call In Day." Try getting a few people with cellular phones to go to shelters or meal programs to get people experiencing homelessness, volunteers, and staff to call the Governor (Mayor, Council Member...) asking them to stop future cuts in essential services. Create a "reverse panhandling" activity—get people experiencing homelessness and other volunteers to hand out quarters and ask people to call their legislators.
- Register people experiencing homelessness to vote. The "You Don't Need A Home to Vote" nonpartisan voter registration/education/get-out-the-vote campaign occurs nationwide each election cycle. National Homeless Voter Registration Week is set for September 22-28, 2002. Find out how you can lobby for homeless voting rights written policy or law in your state. To obtain the voting rights registration manual and poster, contact Michael Stoops, (202) 462-4822 x19 or mstoops@nationalhomeless.org, or visit <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/voting.html>.
- Sponsor a Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week. NCH and the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness (NSCAHH) co-sponsor an Awareness Week every year during the first full week before Thanksgiving. Awareness weeks are organized in more than 500 campuses and communities nationwide. For more information or to order this year's organizing guide, contact Michael Stoops at NCH at (202) 462-4822 x19 or mstoops@nationalhomeless.org, or visit <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/awareness.html>, or NSCAHH at (800) NO-HUNGR or nscah@aol.com.
- Organize a "Faces of Homelessness" panel. Through NCH's "Faces of Homelessness" panel presentations, the voices and faces of those who have experienced homelessness personalize the issue, dispel stereotypes, inspire involvement, and serve as a training,

skill building, and empowerment tool for those who have experienced homelessness. Through a powerful video, emotional stories, and calls for action, these presentations are highly effective. To organize a “panel” in your community or to set up your own Homeless Speakers Bureau, contact NCH’s Speakers Bureau Coordinator Michael O’Neill at (202) 462-4822 x20 or faces@nationalhomeless.org.

- Recognize National Homeless Persons’ Memorial Day. Every year, on or around the first day of winter (December 21), nearly 100 communities nationwide hold local memorial services to remember people who have died homeless during that year. Contact NCH to see if your community already participates in such an event. If no event is planned, NCH has an organizing manual to help you organize a memorial day in your community. Contact Michael Stoops, (202) 462-4822 x19 or mstoops@nationalhomeless.org or visit <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/memorial96.html>.
- Get involved with a local street newspaper. Street newspapers educate the general public about homelessness while providing people experiencing homelessness with a creative outlet to have their articles, photos, artwork, and poetry published and providing employment opportunities as vendors and writers. To get in touch with the street newspaper nearest you or to get help in establishing a newspaper in your community, contact Michael Stoops, (202) 462-4822 x19 or mstoops@nationalhomeless.org, or visit <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/stnews.html>.
- Join the National Homeless Civil Rights Organizing Project. NCH’s National Homeless Civil Rights Organizing Project (NHCROP) is organized at the grassroots level with nine regional field sites throughout the country. NHCROP tracks the growing trend of criminalizing homelessness, along with the recent increase in the number of hate crimes and violence against people experiencing homelessness. Local homeless activists are working to stop this trend by using litigation, lobbying, community organizing, documentation, and research. To get in contact with your regional field site and/or to become a civil rights monitor in your area, contact Michael Stoops, (202) 462-4822 x19 or mstoops@nationalhomeless.org or visit <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/nhcrop.html>.
- Become more aware of your language. Try to minimize language in your own and others’ vocabularies that refers to people experiencing homelessness in derogatory ways. By using expressions such as “people experiencing homelessness” rather than labels such as “bum,” “transient,” or even “the homeless,” we remind ourselves that people who are in such situations are still *people* first—just people who are going through a difficult period in their lives. In a time when they may find it difficult to hold onto their sense of humanity, it is particularly important that we do not use language that further diminishes the dignity of people in homeless situations.

CONTRIBUTE

While the concern and support demonstrated by volunteer work and advocacy are essential, material assistance is also a necessity. Escaping and ending homelessness is a long process. In the meantime, people experiencing homelessness and the programs that serve them need help every day.

Needed items and services might include:

- **Clothing.** The lack of clean, well-fitting clothes and shoes causes great hardship beyond exposure to the elements—it hurts one's self-image and one's chance to get ahead. People experiencing homelessness must travel light, with few opportunities to safely store or adequately clean what they can't carry. On job interviews, a poorly dressed person has little chance for success. Give your clean clothes to those who could use them. Before you give your own clothes or start a clothing drive, talk to your local shelter and find out what items they really need. Most have limited storage space, and can't use winter clothes in summer or vice versa. Some serve only a certain group of people. Please clean the clothes before you donate them.
- **In-kind services and materials.** Service providers may be able to use copying, printing, food, transportation, marketing assistance, computer equipment and assistance, electrical work, building materials, plumbing, etc.
- **Household goods or other items.** Service providers may need items such as kitchen utensils, furniture, books, toys, games, stuffed animals, dolls, diapers, etc.
- **Books.** People experiencing homelessness may have limited access to a library and find that there is little for them to do when spending a night at a shelter. Find out if your local shelter would appreciate donations of books. Consider organizing a book drive to create a small library at the shelter if there is not already one there.
- **Computers.** Many non-profit organizations have a difficult time purchasing expensive but essential equipment such as computers. If you have a machine you no longer need, a local shelter or service provider might greatly appreciate the donation. Shelter guests might also appreciate the donation of machines for their use, although you should check if a shelter would have space to set up public computers.
- **Homeless “survival kits.”** Create and distribute kits that include items such as cups, pots, pans, soap, shampoo, toothpaste, toothbrushes, and cosmetics. (Try coordinating this through a group that gives out meals from a van, for example.) During cold weather, organize drives for blankets, coats, hats, scarves, mittens, socks, and the like.
- **Phone calls.** Help people experiencing homelessness contact loved ones by offering the opportunity to make free long distance calls on holidays.
- **Job opportunities.** Encourage your company, school, or place of worship to hire people experiencing homelessness (if they are not already working). Most unemployed homeless adults desperately want to work, but need an employer to give them a chance.
- **Support for a homeless person or family.** As people move out of a shelter or transitional housing program, consider raising money to contribute for a security deposit, or assist by contributing household goods, babysitting, or moral support. See if your local shelter has a partnering program.

Other things you might do to contribute include:

- **Raise funds for a program.** Ask your group to abstain from one meal and donate the proceeds to a shelter or soup kitchen. Sponsor a benefit concert or coffee house featuring

local musicians and poets (Don't forget to include homeless and formerly homeless performers!). Organize a walk-a-thon or a yard sale and donate the proceeds.

- **Consider giving directly to people experiencing homelessness.** Deciding whether or not to give to panhandlers is a personal decision. Some may not give money out of fear that it may be spent supporting an addiction. Although this is occasionally true, the money also may help someone buy a meal, afford housing, buy clothes, purchase an ID to stay in a shelter, pay for transportation to a job, childcare, healthcare, support a family member—the possibilities are numerous. In some cases, instead of giving money, people carry gift certificates to restaurants or granola bars, peanut butter crackers, sandwiches, or fruit to give to homeless people.
- **Smile.** Whether or not you choose to give change, *please don't look away from homeless people as if they do not exist.* Making eye contact, saying a few words, or smiling (provided that it is a situation in which you feel comfortable doing so) can reaffirm the humanity of a person at a time when homelessness seems to have stripped it away. Most people will be glad simply to be acknowledged. For more insight into panhandling and homelessness, read “Panhandling: A Little Understanding,” at <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/panhandle.html>.

CONTINUE TO EDUCATE YOURSELF, YOUR FAMILY AND YOUR COMMUNITY!

- Visit NCH's website. Our regularly updated site (<http://www.nationalhomeless.org>) contains information on all our activities as well as links to sites dealing with homelessness across the country. NCH maintains updated Facts Sheets on many aspects of homelessness including causes, numbers, and special issues, which can be accessed at <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/facts.html>. Read the Fact Sheets to familiarize yourself with the latest information, and then share what you learn with your community—your place of worship, school, colleagues, friends, neighbors, media, and elected officials.

Also try the following sites:

- The 2000 U.S. Conference of Mayor's Report on Hunger and Homelessness: http://www.usmayors.org/uscm/news/press_releases/documents/hunger_release.htm
- The National Alliance to End Homelessness: <http://www.naeh.org>
- The National Low Income Housing Coalition: <http://www.nlihc.org>
- The National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness: <http://www.nscanh.org>
- The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty: <http://www.nlchp.org>
- Homes for the Homeless/Institute for Children and Poverty: <http://www.homesforthehomeless.com/hfh>
- The Better Homes Fund: <http://thebetterhomesfund.org>
- Universal Living Wage Campaign: <http://www.universallivingwage.org>
- For many other links related to homelessness: <http://csf.colorado.edu/homeless/index.html>
- To find out other ways to help homeless people: <http://earthsystems.org/ways/list.html>
- Follow your local news. Read your local newspaper regularly to keep abreast of what is happening to homeless and low-income people and the policies that affect them in your community.

- Take advantage of teachable moments. Circumstances may vary, but we can generally trust that a person who spends his or her days and nights without a permanent home faces obstacles making it difficult to fit into mainstream society's ideas of how one should look, act, sound, and smell. When you see others behaving in insulting ways toward someone who is homeless, take advantage of the opportunity to share your compassionate and informed view on the difficult circumstances and obstacles facing people experiencing homelessness. You may be able to take the damaging arrow aimed at a person who is homeless and turn it into something constructive.
- Talk to children about homelessness. For book lists, video suggestions, lesson plans, and teaching materials about homelessness, contact NCH at (202) 462-4822, or visit <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/fmn2001/education.html>.
- Read. Check out some of the many books published about homelessness in America. A few recommendations to get you started are listed below.
- Educate Others. You have a great capacity to educate not only yourself, but others as well. Friends, family, and people within your community will benefit greatly from a compassionate and informed point-of-view. As you learn more about the problem of homelessness, share what you find out with those around you. In some cases, you may learn as much from the reflections of those around you as from a book. Whatever you do, don't let the insights you gain stop with you! Opening up a dialogue is an essential first step we can all take in confronting this difficult problem.

Reference:

Helping America's Homeless: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing? Martha Burt, Laudan K. Aron, & Edgar Lee, Urban Institute Press, 2001. (To order, call (202) 261-5687 or toll-free (877) 847-7377)

Homelessness in America, Jim Baumhol ed., Oryx Press, 1996. (To order, call NCH at (202) 737-6444)

Narrative:

Travels with Lizbeth, Lars Eighner, Fawcett Books, 1994.

Tell Them Who I Am, Elliott Liebow The Free Press-a division of Macmillan, Inc., 1993.

Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America, Jonathan Kozol, Random House, 1988.

A Roof over My Head: Homeless Women and the Shelter Industry Jean Calterone Williams (April 2003)

Beyond the Shelter Wall: Homeless Families Speak Out
Ralph daCosta et al. (2004)

Cardboard Condo : How the Homeless Survive the Streets
Robert C. Greene (January 2005)

Helping America's Homeless: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing
Martha R. Burt et al. (April 2001)

Lonesome Rangers: Homeless Minds, Promised Lands, Fugitive Cultures
John Leonard (February 2002)

Stranger to the System (Life Portraits of a New York City Homeless Community)
Jim Flynn (June 2003)

Safe Haven: The Story of a Shelter for Homeless Women
Rae Bridgman (June 2003)

The Way Home: Ending Homelessness in America Harry N Abrams (December 1999)

Without a Net : Middle Class and Homeless (with Kids) in America: My Story
Michelle Kennedy (February 2005)

With No Direction Home : Homeless Youth on the Road and In the Streets (Case Studies on Contemporary Social Issues)
Marni Finkelstein (March 2004)