

# BEST PRACTICES WHEN ENCOUNTERING SOMEONE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

- **In general, never engage someone alone. Always have a second person with you.**
  - This is the most important guideline. To ensure you are safe at all times, never engage with a homeless person by yourself. However, how you define “by yourself” can vary based on your comfort level. You might be comfortable engaging with someone as long as you are in a public place, or you might not feel comfortable unless you are with several people you know.
- **Be informed**
  - Homelessness comes in all forms, shapes, and sizes. You may not realize that some people you encounter are homeless. Some people may work full time, have advanced degrees, and simply lack a home. Others may be scared, show distrust, exhibit symptoms of trauma, or they may be locked in a prolonged struggle with PTSD, substance abuse, or a mental health condition and may not be receiving the treatment they need. Always be mindful and open to what someone else is experiencing.
- **Be Kind**
  - *Acknowledge someone.* Smile. Say good morning. Ask them how they’re doing. However, do not expect or force someone to mirror your feelings, experience, or beliefs. Take your cues from them.
  - *Speak respectfully.* If you don’t feel comfortable engaging at the moment, whether that’s because you are alone or simply can’t be present, explain kindly that you can’t help at the moment or that you want to help but are running late for a meeting. Offering some context and kindness goes a long way.
- **Gifts, Not Cash**
  - Cash is best when given directly to aid organizations. That said, there are ways you can engage with the homeless without giving cash. If panhandlers ask for cash, hand out water, hygiene kits (containing soap, deodorant, toothbrushes, toothpaste, etc.), granola bars, or \$5 McDonald’s gift cards from your car window. Or if someone stops you on the street asking for money for something to eat, grab them something at the closest restaurant where you feel safe. If you are with others and feel comfortable, you can let someone join you inside a restaurant for something to eat. Additionally, you can also give them information about resources (such as food banks or shelters) nearby.
- **Respect Boundaries**
  - Both yours and theirs.
  - Keep physical space between the two of you. You don’t know what kind of trauma a person may have faced or how they may react if you touch them. You also don’t want to give away too much personal information, especially about where you live. Finally, it’s always ok to say no or to disengage if someone tries to touch you or makes you feel uncomfortable or threatened.
  - Stranger danger goes both ways, so respect the other person’s space. Some homeless individuals may be leery of you due to fears about human trafficking or because of past trauma. Ask friendly questions and practice active listening skills, recognizing that the person you are interacting with is free to share their personal stories on their own terms and respond—or not respond—to you. If you are expecting gratitude for interacting with someone, you may want to think about why you wanted to engage with them in the first place.
- **Stay Safe, If Need Be, Call For Help**
  - If you feel unsafe or someone is at risk of hurting themselves or others, call for help.
  - If someone is agitated or having a mental health crisis, and you feel comfortable doing so, attempt to de-escalate the situation. Lower the volume of your voice. Fewer words are better. If you don’t feel comfortable, walk away and call for help. When calling the police, you can ask for a CIT (Crisis Intervention Team) officer, who is specially trained in de-escalating persons in crisis. Explain the situation carefully to avoid endangering yourself, the person, or others.

## IMPORTANT PHONE NUMBERS

Emergency – 911

Siena Francis House

Mandy Rose (402) 706-6307

Janis Boos (402) 960-2549