

It is hard to come to The Basilica any time of the year without coming face-to-face with people who are homeless “signing” for money. The site of people panhandling is powerful and provocative—and it is an experience that pulls at the hearts and minds of every person of faith.

What is the best response to the people who are “signing” and panhandling on the corners of our city? How does one act in accord with our faith when there are so many variables to consider? What is the compassionate thing to do? What is the faithful thing to do?

Recently, The Basilica was part of two programs about panhandling through our work with the Downtown Congregations to End Homelessness. These programs wrestled with the complex issues of homelessness and panhandling. Together with business owners, police officers, neighborhood representatives, mental health experts, and homeless advocates, The Basilica led a conversation that got to the heart of the question: How should I respond to panhandling?

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Realizing that you will always be guided by your conscience at the moment of meeting the person panhandling, we offer the following guidelines adopted by the Downtown Congregations to End Homelessness for responding to people who panhandle in our community. I invite you to prayerfully read these suggestions and enter into conversation with your family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors.

1. Give recognition and an openness to a relationship

The most important part of a response is to recognize the dignity of the person panhandling. With an open heart, greet the person, and if it is possible, get to know their name and their story.

2. Do not give money

Giving money perpetuates panhandling in our community: If you make money, you keep doing it. Giving money also feeds addictions and leads people into a downward spiral of health. Giving money may be the easy thing to do, but we are challenged to respond in a compassionate way that makes a real difference.

One man who was formerly homeless shared his story of “making” over \$400 in less than half an hour panhandling in front of The Basilica one Sunday morning. He admitted that the magnitude scared him. He said, “It was so easy. I could feel myself being pulled toward letting go of everything else in my life and staying there. I had to stop right away or I was going to be lost in my addiction.”

3. Build relationships with and support programs that work to end homelessness

Get to know the programs at The Basilica and in the broader community that work on the important issue of ending homelessness. Specifically, get involved with The Downtown Congregations to End Homelessness, Basilica St. Vincent de Paul Ministry, and St. Stephens Human Services. Support these programs with

donations and volunteer time, and direct people who panhandle to them. For more information, contact the Christian Life office.

4. Advocate for policies and laws that will address issues that are the root cause of panhandling (including homelessness, mental illness, poverty, addiction)

Get to know your elected officials, and let them know your priority of ending panhandling. Tell the stories of the people that you meet on the streets. Share with everyone you know about why ending homelessness is important to our community and to you. Get involved in The Basilica Voices for Justice Team and work to empower our community to advocate for these important issues.

The experience of coming face-to-face with people panhandling invites and challenges us to put our faith into action. Let us struggle together as we prayerfully decide what action to take.

