

MINISTRY TO THE HOMELESS

Beth is a mentally ill person living on the streets. She refuses to take the medicine that would help her lead a more normal life. Her small government check is not enough to meet her needs. Sometimes, Beth's mental condition worsens and she must be hospitalized. When her condition improves, she is released and back on the streets again. Family and friends are powerless to do anything to stop this cycle. Beth needs a caring group of people to bring hope to her life.



WHO ARE THE HOMELESS?

Beth is only one of thousands of homeless people in the U.S. Some live on the streets, but others live in automobiles or boxes, under bridges, in railroad cars, or doubled up with relatives who can scarce afford to keep them. Many live in shelters. Some live in shacks so run down they cannot be considered fit for human occupation.

How many people are in this condition? Getting an exact count is impossible due to the living arrangements of homeless people. The most recent estimate suggests that 700,000 people are homeless on any given night and up to 2 million will be homeless at some point during a year. A 1994 White House study found that 12 million U.S. adult residents have been homeless at some point in their lives. These people come from all socio-economic classes, all races and ethnic

groups. Forty percent of homeless men are military veterans.

Homelessness is no respecter of persons. The traditional idea of homelessness is that of the skid row alcoholic or derelict, those hunched in doorways and abandoned buildings, people carrying signs saying “will work for food,” and those sleeping on sidewalk grates on city streets. While these certainly are true depictions of homelessness, they are far from the complete picture.

The Steward B. McKinney Act defines as homeless any person who “. . . lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence . . .” This narrow definition recognizes only the literally homeless—those on the streets, in shelters, or within a week of eviction. This definition works better for urban areas than it does for rural areas. The rural homeless seldom have shelters to go to, instead living in the places listed above, as well as in caves or tents in the woods.

Besides these homeless people, there are the travelers who go from place to place subsisting on odd jobs, or those who are rarely seen or counted because they make do in a different location every night. Also among the homeless are men, women, and youth who will sacrifice their morality by “shacking up” for a night, a week, or a month in order to avoid living on the street.

Why are these people homeless? Sometimes it is due to bad choices, but it is also due to misfortune, illness, and inequities in our society. About one-fourth of all homeless people suffer some form of severe and persistent mental illness. Others are physically ill or disabled.

The most common contributors to homelessness include:

- Poverty
- Addiction
- Mental illness
- Lack of affordable housing
- Unemployment
- Underemployment
- Physical abuse
- Physical illness
- Choice

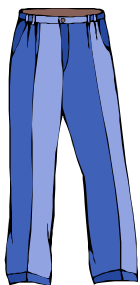
It is important to understand the causes and needs of the homeless before planning a ministry. The needs of each group of homeless vary, and so will ministry techniques. But with each group, you should understand that there are physical, social, and spiritual dimensions to their needs. To be a homeless person is to be lonely, even in a crowded shelter. To be homeless is to be caught in a downward spiral unless some intervention is offered.

While homeless people are neither more nor less sinners than any other group, they are often marginalized, ignored, or even despised. Your ministry efforts can help homeless people by offering shelter and resources, but also by treating them with dignity and offering them hope through Jesus Christ.

WHAT IS A HOMELESS MINISTRY?

You have a number of choices when it comes to homeless ministry, because the needs are so great and the populations so varied.

Clothing Ministries



Most Christians are willing to share clothes with homeless people, but communities need a distribution point. Keeping an ample supply of clothing on hand is rarely a problem. Clothing ministry can be a labor-intensive effort; a

number of volunteers will be needed to clean, sort, size, and distribute clothing. Counselors should be trained to share the gospel with clients.

Clothes Closet—This ministry provides a source for clothing. The church or other distribution location

supplies a room where members bring clean, usable clothing. People in need receive clothes. The clothing most needed by



homeless people is durable work clothes. Also needed are socks, shoes, underclothes, and warm winter apparel.

Swap Shop—While similar to the clothes closet, a swap shop attaches a low cost to clothing. Many needy people do not want a hand-out and are happy to purchase clothing or swap one item for another. This concept helps protect the homeless person's dignity.

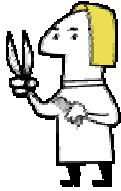
Clothes Drives—Churches can find out what is needed and collect clothing for a nearby shelter. This need will vary from season to season. Items should be clean, useable, and suitable for the season, as most shelters do not have storage room for out of season clothes. Coat or blanket drives make excellent winter projects. Work pants and shoes are high demand items. Gospel tracts can be placed in the pockets of donated clothing items.

Laundry Services—Homeless people usually have a limited supply of clothing and very few opportunities to do laundry. A church can furnish a washer and dryer or provide transportation to a local coin laundry. Clean, neat clothing often means the difference between acceptance and rejection when applying for work.

Hygiene Ministries

Shower Facilities—Personal hygiene is a pressing problem for homeless people who lack access to shelters. Many churches have shower facilities within their buildings and can make these available periodically to those in need. The best approach is to designate times and provide minimal supplies such as soap, towels, razors, and shampoo. Special ministry relationships often come from meeting this need.

Haircuts—Many dedicated Christian barbers and cosmetologists are willing to give time to cutting hair as a ministry. Local barber and beauty schools will often cooperate by donating haircuts or providing these at a low cost.

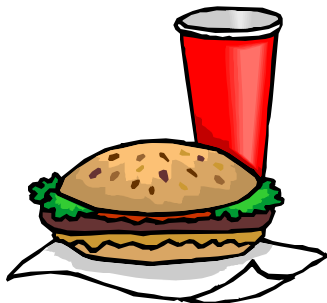


Hygiene Kits—Prepare personal hygiene kits containing soap, disposable razors, combs, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and New Testaments. The kits may be distributed through your local shelter or to needy people who come to your church for help.

Feeding Ministries

Food Pantry—A pantry ministry dispenses food to needy people. Because homeless people rarely have a place to cook, items must be ready-to-eat foods: canned meats and stews, small boxes of cereal, soups, pudding and fruit packs.

Soup Kitchen—A soup kitchen is an organized effort to provide hot meals for a specific group. The best location for a soup kitchen is along the recipients' beaten path. A soup kitchen can be very flexible in approach, offering one or more meals



daily. Meals can also be served weekly, monthly, or on special occasions such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter. To implement this ministry you will need volunteers, food resources, knowledge of other meal programs being offered, and good planning. With all hunger ministries, check your local health regulations as part of your planning process.

Bag Meals—At a designated time and place, recipients are given meals in paper bags. Because of its simplicity and low cost, this service can be carried out with only a few volunteers. This ministry can grow rapidly in areas frequented by homeless people. The meal can be take-out or eat-in.

Frozen Dinners—This ministry can be linked with a Wednesday evening fellowship supper. Extra food is prepared, packaged in individual servings, and frozen. When a hungry individual comes to the church, a frozen dinner can be quickly microwaved while a volunteer or staff member counsels the client.

Established Ministries—Many communities have rescue missions doing a good job ministering to the needs of homeless people. These are worthy of your volunteerism. You can cook and serve at a local mission. Most missions are thrilled to have such an association with local caring churches.

Extended Fellowship Suppers—This ministry idea is based on Wednesday evening fellowship suppers. The church invites those in the community who are without resources to enjoy this meal. The reward in such a ministry is not only feeding the hungry, but also the fellowship, association, and ministry opportunities afforded church members as they come to know needy people face-to-face.

Vouchers—A church choosing this ministry will arrange a voucher system with a local

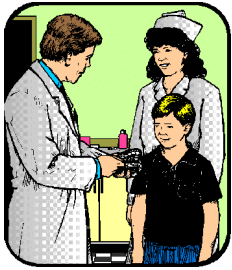
grocery store. The church will give a voucher redeemable only for certain kinds of foods or a prescribed bag of food. The same arrangement could be made with a local café.

Doughnut Stop—Coffee and doughnuts can be offered as a morning snack for homeless people. These products are inexpensive and frequently donated for good causes. The availability of a counselor adds a personal touch to this outreach and provides an easy witness opportunity as people come and go.

Hunger Offerings—Southern Baptists observe World Hunger Day each year. All church gifts are collected and pooled to generate millions of dollars that go directly to feed hungry people. Churches can even apply for these funds to help meet local hunger needs in their communities.

Health Ministries

Medical Clinic—A clinic can be established independently or in cooperation with other churches. Generally, health concerns, first aid, and health education are part of this work. Counselors make a valuable contribution to the clinic by offering spiritual aid.



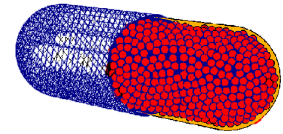
Dental Clinic—A dental clinic can provide a vital ministry to homeless people who generally lack resources and options for dental care. Several working models have been established for this ministry. Mobile dental clinics are at work in some areas, making this ministry widely available.

Tuberculosis Clinic—Tuberculosis (TB) is a major health concern for the homeless. Although TB is easily arrested, early detection remains a critical link in treatment. A TB clinic could be open as few as two

days a week. A medical director and a nursing staff are often enough for this setting. Check with local health officials for pertinent guidelines, rules, and laws.

Optometry Clinic—Another gap in wellness for the homeless is eye care. Providing eye exams and glasses can be a meaningful ministry. An eyeglasses drive, which gathers used glasses for repair and redistribution to the needy, is another way to gather resources for this ministry.

Prescription Medications—Prescription medicines are seldom an option for homeless people since they usually have meager finances.



Some medicines are available through physicians at times. Churches may choose to pay for prescribed medications at a local pharmacy. Full pharmacy ministries have been established in some locations to meet this great need. This is a rewarding and friendly way to meet health needs.

Shelter Ministries

You should be aware that shelter ministries are the most difficult and costly to begin and maintain. Adequate space is a must. Bedding and routine hygiene supplies must be available. You will need a large group of reliable volunteers and the cooperation of your neighbors. Zoning and insurance must be considered. Yet, churches led to provide a shelter ministry will be rewarded as they participate in the lives of homeless people.

Overnight Shelter—Churches must have facilities for feeding the homeless and space where they can sleep. Beds or cots are important for comfortable rest. Ideally, the church should have a shower, washer, and dryer. A sizeable group of volunteers is essential. Check neighborhood restrictions before beginning this work. Counselors are

very effective in this setting, and chapel services help to meet the spiritual needs of homeless guests.

Inclement Weather Shelter—Floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, and freezing weather call for the use of this shelter. Although this ministry can offer more elaborate care, simple pallets on the floor can meet the need.



Rotating Shelter—A rotating shelter is provided by a group of cooperating churches or agencies. The location of the shelter is rotated among the cooperating hosts so that no single church or group carries the burden alone. The rotation usually takes place at one-week intervals. Each sponsor is responsible for meals, cots, counseling, and staffing, as well as the meeting of spiritual needs when it is their turn to be a shelter. It may be necessary to provide transportation to and from the shelter.

Transitional Housing—This ministry provides subsidized apartment-style housing to homeless people, allowing individuals to get jobs and minimize expenses. Some churches will use existing church properties. Others may rent a nearby apartment for this special ministry. Some churches already own houses in their neighborhoods that are suitable for transitional housing. At a specified time, the stabilized person or family will take responsibility for getting their own housing. For the greatest chance of success, screen prospective clients carefully.

Disaster Relief—This ministry is for those suddenly homeless due to fire and other personal tragedies. Churches may monitor police-band broadcasts and send volunteers to the scene to offer immediate help. The church provides a fully furnished apartment for the disaster victim or family, allowing them time to get re-established. The church continues to minister to the family during this recovery period. Some churches permit the family to keep all furnishings.

Specialized Shelters—These shelters meet unique community needs, such as shelter for battered women, homeless children, evicted families, convalescents, stranded travelers, as well as other specific need groups.

HUD Housing—Many communities now have government-owned houses. These may be leased (or bought) at very low prices to qualified groups with approved-use plans. The houses may be used for meeting the needs of homeless people. Explore availability through the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Support Ministries

Support ministries meet specific needs. A support group, for example, is made up of people with a mutual problem or personal issue to resolve. Just listening to the needs and hurts of another can be a great help. Ministry is also done through caring and by sharing godly solutions for life's problems.

Homeless Church—This ministry begins as actual worship services for homeless members of the community. Some churches do this in their own building at some time other than the regular Sunday service.

Mentors—Mentoring programs partner a homeless person or homeless family with a willing church sponsor. The intention is to provide one-on-one training in hopes that the homeless individual will become a believer, grow in discipleship, and become a

stable member of society and the church as they gain employment and housing.

Addictions Support Groups—Addiction continues to be a major problem among the homeless population, and nothing indicates that trend is likely to end soon. Support groups can successfully deal with spiritual issues and other aspects of addiction and recovery. A knowledgeable Christian facilitator is needed to establish an addictions support group. Addicted people need to hear that God is able to help them overcome their problems. Several working models exist that are spiritual in nature and effective in helping clients address important personal issues.

Homeless Support Groups—A church provides a weekly meeting place and a Christian facilitator to guide a discussion group in which homeless people can address important issues they face in their daily lives. This counseling approach must be redemptive in nature and avoid becoming a gripe session.



Adult Reading and Writing—Many homeless people have low literacy levels. Excellent materials and training for beginning and conducting an Adult Reading and Writing ministry are available through the North American Mission Board. These resources are geared toward evangelizing the client as he or she learns to read.

General Education Development (GED) Training—Most people lacking a high school diploma are willing to earn their GED. Many churches are successfully tutoring students through GED outreach programs. This ministry requires a long-term

commitment and reaps tremendous benefits for both church and student. This work requires a working relationship with the local school board for evaluating and testing students. Volunteers can help tutor students.

Reading Room—A church can provide a quiet, nonthreatening place that offers homeless people respite from the daily problems they face. Among those problems is not having a place to be and lacking a place to spend time. Inspirational Christian magazines and books should be provided, along with employment ads and phone access. The availability of a counselor in this setting is important.

Mail Room/Message Center—Because homeless people have no address, a church can allow them to receive mail at the church address. This service affords homeless people the dignity of doing personal business in a more normal manner. A message center can be set up at the church switchboard to take telephone messages for homeless people who use the church address.

Job Bank—This ministry can be as complex as becoming a job development and resource center seeking potential placement of clients, or it can be as simple as helping someone fill out a job application and taking messages from potential employers.

English-as-a-Second-Language Classes—A small percentage of homeless people are immigrants trying to establish themselves in a new geographical area. Many have a limited use of English. To function effectively, all must learn to speak, read, and write English. Teaching English as a second language may be most appealing to churches



with international groups among their memberships

Chapel Services—Volunteer regularly to conduct or participate in worship services at a local homeless shelter. Shelters generally welcome Christians to assist them in different aspects of their ministry. Homeless people are usually very receptive to the gospel message.



Hotel Reps—Become an activist among local hotels. The sheets, towels, blankets, and bedspreads hotels discard are often still in useable condition. Encourage the hotel to donate these items to you for use in shelters or for distribution to homeless people.

Recycling Projects—Large amounts of money can be generated when an entire church undertakes a recycling project. The recycled items can include anything from aluminum to paper. These funds can be rotated from one ministry to another as homeless people are helped.

HOW DO WE PLAN OUR MINISTRY?

With church members committed to praying for you, conduct a community needs assessment. Seek God's direction before embarking on any new ministry venture. It is okay to start small and add ministries as your knowledge, confidence level, and pool of volunteers grows.

As you plan, list your needed resources in the categories of people, facilities, items, and funds. Where are the gaps? Do not be afraid to go before the church or missions groups and ask for help in obtaining those resources. If unlooked-for resources turn up, consider how you could use these. For example, someone may give you a coffee

maker, although that was not at all what you wanted. Rather than turn it down, brainstorm ways it could be used: a coffee and doughnut ministry, refreshment time in a support group, fellowship time before a worship service, or as part of a soup kitchen. Resources should not dictate your ministry, only God's leading should do that. But resources can expand the possibilities.

WHAT SOURCES OF HELP ARE AVAILABLE?

- Your community assessment survey should have unearthed agencies and organizations that can help you minister to the homeless.
- LifeWay Christian Resources has witnessing training materials, as well as Bibles and Scripture portions.
- Churches in your association may donate good used magazines and books for a reading room or chapel ministry.

HOW DO WE BEGIN OUR MINISTRY?

When you have selected your ministry and gathered resources, train your volunteers in personal witnessing and in relating to the homeless. Help them know what to expect and how to be good ambassadors for Christ to the homeless.

Explain your ministry to community agencies and professionals working with the homeless. Include law enforcement and the fire department, as they will often be the first to know of people who are suddenly homeless. This goes beyond publicity, as you will also be explaining the limits of your ministry. You



will do this, not to discourage people from referring the homeless to you, but to avoid confusion and unmet expectations.

Emphasize what you are equipped to do for homeless people. Be sensitive to the fact that these networking conversations with community officials are also a witness to them.

Publicize your ministry if it is something “open to the public,” like a soup kitchen. If it is a mentoring or other one-on-one ministry, large amounts of publicity may not be necessary. Whatever ministry you begin, you can count on word to spread among the homeless population. They will tell each other not only of the resources you offer, but the manner in which you treated them. Your Christlike kindness to one homeless person may be a witness to others.

HOW DO WE EVALUATE OUR MINISTRY?

Some numbers you will want to know are:

- Number of meals/hygiene kits/clothes, and other items distributed
- Number of individuals and families served
- Number of people attending worship services or support groups
- Number of people moved from the streets to temporary housing
- Number of people moved from temporary quarters to permanent housing
- Number of professions of faith and baptisms

Numbers, while helpful, can be hard to obtain and do not give the whole picture. You will want to discuss how the homeless people respond to volunteers. How do volunteers respond to homeless people? What is the church’s attitude to the ministry? Does the ministry have a good working relationship with other churches, community agencies, and organizations? What is going well, and what could be done better?