



Frequently Asked Questions about Homelessness

1. Who do I call if I am concerned about someone who is homeless in my neighborhood?

If the situation is not an emergency, and you are just trying to ensure they have been offered help, call Baltimore's 311. Please be prepared with a description of the person and the location where an outreach worker could typically find them during the work week. (Because of the need to collect specific information, the 311 web application is not a good tool for requesting assistance for someone who is homeless.)

2. Where should I refer someone for help or services?

If you know the location of the nearest soup kitchen, shelter or clinic, giving someone directions can help if they are new to the area and do not yet know local resources. Baltimore has a Street Outreach Information Card or "Street Card" which has information about local services. You can access this card online and print it to share with people you see regularly. (<https://human-services.baltimorecity.gov/homeless-services/documents>).

3. Who do I call if I see someone having a mental health crisis?

If the person appears to be a danger to themselves or others, call 911. If you are with the person in crisis, and they are willing to talk to a crisis worker over the phone, call the Baltimore Crisis Response Team at 410-433-5175. They have mobile teams that come to individuals experiencing a crisis and can bring clients to hospitals as needed.

4. What should I do if someone is intoxicated?

If they are unresponsive, are not breathing, or if you are concerned for their safety or the safety of others, call 911. If the person appears to be okay but is "sleeping it off", it is alright to let them be.

5. How can police be helpful to intervene when there's a problem?

If someone is lying on the ground and is unresponsive or someone is posing as a danger to themselves or others, call 911. Baltimore City police officers receive BEST trainings (Behavioral Emergency Services Team) from Behavioral Health Systems Baltimore, which trains officers on how to work with individuals with mental illness, such as by de-escalating a crisis or referring people to mental health resources in the community. However, it's often difficult to predict how the police will handle a situation. If you have asked someone to move off your front steps (for example), it's ok to call the police—but it is reasonable to ask yourself first. Many "nuisance" crimes, such as trespassing or loitering, are not an arrestable offense, so in many situations, officers can only issue a warning or citation. If your safety is not at risk, a friendly conversation might be the most productive long-term outcome.

6. Why do people urinate, wash, or perform other personal activities in public?

People experiencing homelessness do not have regular access to restrooms and there are not public restrooms available in Baltimore. Many people will request to use restrooms in restaurants or gas stations but are often turned away, which leaves them with few options. As a result, people will use alleys, or other "hidden" spaces to perform daily personal activities and basic life functions.

7. Why do people panhandle?

It is important to note that not all people experiencing homelessness panhandle and not all people who panhandle are homeless. People who are homeless panhandle for a variety of reasons. Some homeless shelters in the downtown area charge \$3 per night to stay. For one month, that means raising \$90 to avoid sleeping on the street. Others ask for money to buy food or cigarettes. And still others will panhandle for money that feeds an addiction. Everyone has their own reasons.

8. What should I do when I'm bothered by aggressive panhandling?

Aggressive panhandling is against the law and it creates a hostile environment. You could walk away or ask the person to stop in a clear, calm manner. If you feel threatened, call for help from someone standing nearby or at a local business.

9. Why do homeless people have cell phones?

Cell phones are given away for free or discounted through many programs. This is often a good way for case managers and other service providers to stay in touch with a client. Having a phone also enables the individual to find jobs, access health care services, connect with family and their children's schools, and call for help in an emergency.

10. How should I respond to requests for spare change?

There are different views about this, and your response might depend on your mood or the person asking. One option is to say, "Sorry, no" and move on. Another option would be to offer a sandwich, a granola bar, banana, bottle of water, or something else of tangible value. If you chose to share money, spare change loose in your pocket is easier to pull out compared to opening your wallet, which can feel unsafe. However, simply offering a sincere smile and a kind word while making eye contact often means a lot and it's free.

11. I don't feel comfortable giving someone money, are there other things I can do?

You can talk to the person, even if briefly. Ask them their name. Introduce yourself. If you do want to offer something other than money, gift cards to places that sell food, clothing, or water can help them get essentials. Homeless people are often ignored, so a smile, wave or hello is a friendly way to greet anyone in your community. However, sometimes the person may not be interested in talking with you, so try again the next time you see them.

12. Should I give my leftovers to folks?

You can always offer what you have to someone, and often they appreciate the gesture (even if they do not indicate a "thank you"). However, if someone refuses to take it, don't be offended. They may have mental health or other issues that interfere with their ability to communicate well, or they may just not want a stranger's food. If you are so inclined, you can always ask someone if they want something and drop it off on your way back.

13. I've offered people coffee or water and s/he didn't take it, why?

Accepting food, water, or other things from a stranger may make some people uncomfortable. If you are interested in helping, you can ask what they like. You don't have to give someone something, but asking what an individual likes will increase the likelihood of them accepting your kind offer.

14. Some people just want to be homeless, right?

Very few, if any, people want to be homeless. Living on the streets is traumatic and difficult. Shelters can be unpleasant and unsafe places and housing programs are often at full capacity. Many people who are homeless are working but are unable to afford the cost of housing in our community. Others who have been homeless a long time tend to have more significant mental health and addictions issues, which can make it harder for service providers to get them off the street and back into housing.

Through *The Journey Home*, Baltimore's plan to end homelessness, we are making a concerted effort to improve housing and homeless services to reduce the number of people who experience homelessness in our community. Please consider getting involved with our work by contacting journey.home@baltimorecity.gov.