

How To Help People Experiencing Homelessness:

What Our Guests Say



**WATER STREET
MISSION**

Restored to be restorers

As the largest service provider to men and women experiencing homelessness in Lancaster, we often hear the question, what do I do when I meet someone experiencing homelessness?

Do I give money, food, or other supplies? And how does one know what to say in these situations?

If you google those questions, you'll find many often contradicting answers. And for a good reason. Homelessness is a complex issue, and a one size fits all approach isn't always practical.

This is why we took these questions straight to our guests — men and women who reside at Water Street Mission — and discovered what they find are the most helpful (or hurtful) ways to care for neighbors experiencing homelessness. The following are

3 key takeaways from those conversations:

Takeaway #1: *Better Information*



**Information is the
key to everything**

— Water Street Mission Guest

Almost all guests brought up the need for **better information**. That's why this is our top takeaway. Knowing local organizations to direct someone to can be a big help. As one guest said: "When you're doing well, you're not thinking about where you can go for help, but as soon as the walls come in, then you don't know where to go." Having information handy is a great way to love neighbors struggling to know what their next steps should be.

Sharing More Specific and Positive Information:

From guests we spoke to, we heard one response most often. Guests said they would have come to Water Street sooner or had more peace if they had known what Water Street Mission was really like. Most wished they had known what specific programs Water Street offered. Water Street's **counseling, medical services, safe and clean facilities**, and **helpful staff** were the most frequently mentioned reasons to try Water Street.

Additionally, concerns over what rules they would have to follow while living in a shelter caused some to delay coming to Water Street. Guests interviewed shared that, while it can be a big adjustment, overwhelmingly the rules are basic, individualized, and not hard to follow.

Important Resource: 2-1-1

2-1-1 is Lancaster's Central Resource line. You can always direct someone to call 2-1-1 for more information on shelter, rent, grocery assistance, medical assistance, bill assistance, and more. 2-1-1 also refers people to our Access Center, where they can do an intake for Water Street Mission.

As one guest explained:

"The rules that are here are put in place for our safety and our healing...And they're not hard. Sometimes, it might be because it's a more structured thing, and many people don't come from good structure so it can be a hard adjustment. But the rules are there for everybody's safety."



Takeaway #2: *On Needing Someone to Talk to*

Some Wanted to Talk:

Guests were most heavily divided on whether they would have liked someone in the community to talk to. Some felt having a friendly conversation with a friend, acquaintance, or neighbor in the community would be welcomed and much needed to combat feelings of depression and loneliness.

As one guest responded: "When I was out there on the street, I was treated badly. But when I came up on this floor in Water Street, I got a lot of love from these guys and that made me want to stick it out. So why can't people be more loving out there?"

Others felt they would welcome a stranger approaching them and offering to pray for them or even hug them.

Others Didn't Want Conversation:

On the other hand, some guests felt concerned about conversing with someone in the community, especially if they were strangers. Their top concerns were fears of judgment, lack of understanding, or pushing specific religious views.

Guests who felt they would not like to have a conversation often thought it would be better to direct them to a local resource. In the words of one guest: "I think that if you can see someone struggling, like maybe your neighbor, if you can just go to them and say "Hey by the way, if anything happens, just let me know, I can refer you as a friend to a place like Water Street."

One guest remarked:

While he was living on the street, the moment that got through to him was when someone stopped, looked him in the eye, and simply said, "God bless you." That human interaction gave him hope and sparked him to reach out for more help.

One guest described:

The death of his wife as what catapulted him into grief, and eventually homelessness. While grieving the loss of his wife, others took advantage of him, and caused him further pain and financial loss. As a result, he adamantly did not want to speak to or trust strangers. He felt that coming to Water Street, where he could develop consistent relationships and slowly rebuild trust, was critical in his healing journey.



Takeaway #3: Should I Give Items/Money?

Most guests generally welcome resources like food, money, and self-care items. To many, sharing resources was seen as a kind gesture, meaning more than the material item itself. Some guests pointed out that there can be a risk in giving money, saying you can't always know how that money will be spent.

Either way, we repeatedly heard that resources alone are no replacement for being generous with your time. "Sometimes it's not a question so much about looking for resources so much as needing someone just to be there for us," one former guest remarked. "Someone to listen, and talk and bounce ideas off of, and kind of process things with."

Of course, what guests needed varied from person to person. Most suggested simply offering items and asking if they would be helpful.

Conclusion

We Need Help Getting the Word Out There:

If there's one major takeaway from our guests, it's how they believed getting more information, specifically better information, into the community is needed. Having resources like 2-1-1 at your fingertips is a great start. But there also seems to be a strong need for members of the community to gain a *deeper understanding of what local service providers offer*.

The next big takeaway is simply that it's always important to follow the cues of any individual you speak with. Some will want to have a conversation or accept resources, others may not. No one will do it perfectly. But as you can tell, even just taking the time to read through this piece is a great start and a beautiful way to show love to your neighbors! So on their behalf...thank you!

Understand More About Water Street:

Would you like more in-depth information on Water Street Mission? Consider taking a tour, volunteering, or learning more through our website and podcast.

Just visit wsm.org/see-the-impact to see more.