



# **6 Ways To Help People Experiencing Homelessness in Lancaster:**

**What Guests at  
Water Street Mission 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 6 key takeaways from those conversations:

## **Takeaway #1: Providing Information is Key**

Almost all guests brought up the need for clear information to be provided to those either on the street or nearing the loss of housing. 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.

## Takeaway #2: Be Specific in Shelter Information You Share

From guests we spoke to, we heard one response often repeated. Guests said they would have come to Water Street sooner or had more peace in coming to Water Street, had they known what the Mission was really like.

Most wished they had known what specific programs were 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.

### 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."***

## Call Water Street's Access Center

If you encounter someone on the streets or someone losing their housing, you can have them call Water Street Mission's Access Center at (717) 358-2030 or visit the Access Center in person at 210 S. Prince St, Lancaster, PA 17603 to get more information about doing an intake. Our hours for receiving intake requests are Monday through Thursday 8:00am – 3:00pm and Friday 8:00am – 2:00pm.

Water Street Mission is the largest shelter provider for men, women, and women with children, in Lancaster County. We also provide longer-term residential programs for guests looking to address deeper issues that prevent them from rising out of homelessness and poverty.

## Clay Street Shelter and Other Resources

Clay Street Low Barrier Emergency Shelter is located in the basement of Otterbein United Methodist Church at 20 East Clay Street in Lancaster City. It does not offer meals, but staff will strive to connect guests with meals and resources that can help them find longer-term stability and support. Those in need of shelter can call 2-1-1 or speak with a staff member in person during intake hours (7:30 pm-9:30pm) to complete enrollment.

Milagro House ([Milagrohouse.org](http://Milagrohouse.org)) and the YWCA ([YWCALancaster.org](http://YWCALancaster.org)) are key partners that both offer shelter to women and women with children.

Additionally, Tenfold ([wearetenfold.org](http://wearetenfold.org)), Anchor ([anchorlancaster.org](http://anchorlancaster.org)), and Lancaster Food Hub ([lancasterfoodhub.org](http://lancasterfoodhub.org)) offer critical resources to individuals experiencing homelessness. The Food Hub's Outreach Center at 812 N. Queen Street is open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday 12:30 -4:00 pm (extended hours during Code Red/Blue weather conditions).

You can drop in to meet with outreach specialists, connect with partner agencies, find a ready-to-eat food bag or emergency clothing, and more. You can also call 717-690-8054 to connect with an Outreach Team member.

## Takeaway #3: Take a Moment to Have a Conversation

Some guests responded that they would have wanted their neighbors to stop and talk to them while they were on the street or struggling with housing. They felt that simply having a friendly conversation with an acquaintance, neighbor, or friend in the community would be welcomed and 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.

**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.*



## **Takeaway #4: Read the Cues of Who You're Talking To**

On the other hand, some guests felt concerned about conversing with someone in the community, especially if they were strangers. Their top concerns were fear 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 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 #5: Consider Sharing Resources

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.





## Takeaway #6: Help Get 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 available like the number to Water Street's Access Center 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.

For our part, if you'd like to get more information about what Water Street Mission offers, so you can share it with those you meet, consider taking a tour of our facilities, volunteering, or learning more through our website and podcast.

Visit [wsm.org/see-the-impact](https://wsm.org/see-the-impact) to learn more.



## Make An Impact

### 1 | Pray

Follow our monthly prayer guide at [wsm.org/pray](https://wsm.org/pray)

### 2 | Volunteer

See all volunteer opportunities at [wsm.org/volunteer](https://wsm.org/volunteer)

### 3 | Donate

Support us through gifts of money, food and other essential goods at [wsm.org/donate](https://wsm.org/donate)

## Contact Us

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