
MINISTRY TO THE HOMELESS





The title “homeless” in America has become a catch-all phrase that covers a multitude of people, groups, situations and causes. Some are single men and women who have few family ties or relationships that can provide any support for them. Some are families with children who struggle to find housing, food and security on the streets or shelters in which the families can stay together. Some are runaway adolescents who weren’t able to stay in their home situations. Some are veterans who have returned from active duty with physical, mental or emotional injuries. Most have not only lost their homes—they’ve lost their hope.

Associated Press reporters Jae Hong and Brian Melley began their report on homeless in America with these haunting words: “It’s easy to walk past the homeless, to disregard the guy lying on the street or ignore the woman standing at an intersection holding a handwritten sign with a plea for help. It’s harder to look away when you’ve seen their eyes. Look past lines drawn by hard living or the still-soft skin of someone young but struggling to break the cycle of dependency or abuse. Their eyes hint at lost promise or offer a glimmer of hope.”¹

The homeless are easily seen and often ignored. Carl, a homeless man from San Francisco, explains, “The way folks look at you on the street. It’s overwhelming. It makes you feel worse. Like you’re less than nothing...We’re people, you know?”²

If taking the love of Christ to those who are struggling to exist day by day is at the heart of your congregation, you may be called to ministering to the homeless. If so, read on. This ministry guide can help you get started!

¹ Jae Hong and Brian Melley, “Eyes of the homeless reveal stories of heartache, hope,” Nov. 6, 2017; <https://apnews.com/Oc142bf9fd1342c2a36f4a28030c1d2c/Sorrow-heartache-hope-Eyes-of-homeless-offer-hint-of-life>.

² Dan Moore, “What the Homeless Want Us to Know”; <https://thebolditalic.com/what-the-homeless-want-us-to-know-1857da5d5e39>.

Homelessness in America

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the homeless can be defined into four categories. In each category, the homeless lack sufficient means to provide housing on their own.

- **Those who are literally homeless:** This includes both individuals and families who do not have a regular place to stay at night, or a regular place that is meant for people to live in. This includes those who live in temporary shelters, transient shelters, or have been placed in motels by charitable organizations.
- **Those who are an imminent risk of homelessness:** This includes both individuals and families whose place of residence will be lost within fourteen days of the time they make application for homeless assistance.
- **Those who are homeless under other Federal statutes:** This includes teenagers and young adults under the age of 25, and families with children and youth, who have been without permanent residence for sixty days, or have moved two or more times within sixty days.
- **Those who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence:** This includes those who have no other residence and who lack the financial means or support to obtain permanent housing.³

These following definitions help categorize patterns within homelessness: “the temporarily, episodically, and chronically homeless.”⁴

- *Temporary homelessness* includes people who have been displaced from their residences by either natural or man-made catastrophes, such as fires, floods, or earthquakes or eviction because of loss of employment.
- *Episodic homelessness* includes people who repeatedly become homeless for periods of time, such as those who receive disability or cash advances and pay for their housing weekly and run out of funds before the end of the month. These can also include mentally ill youth who live with family but periodically leave to live on the streets.
- *Chronic homelessness* includes people who live on the streets for more than a year, many of whom are mentally ill or struggling with substance abuse.⁵

The picture of homelessness in America can best be understood by identifying the characteristics of the various subgroups within the homeless: Homeless individual adults; homeless families; homeless runaway and throwaway youths; homeless elderly people; and veterans.

Homeless Individual Adults: The single largest group of homeless is individual adults. Over 56% are men and 25% are women. The percent of homeless females has increased over the years. This increase is based on a growing number of women struggling with mental health and pregnancy issues.⁶

Homeless Families: The fastest growing subgroup in numbers of homeless is families with children, primarily mothers and their children. Little is known about homeless families with fathers. Most homeless mothers are “in their late 20s, are either single or divorced and have completed at least several years of high school.”⁷

³ The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Federal-Definitions-of-Youth-Homelessness.pdf.

⁴ “Dynamics of Homelessness,” p. 2.

⁵ “Dynamics of Homelessness,” pp. 2-4.

⁶ “1 Who are the Homeless?” Homelessness, Health, and Human Needs, p. 7; available online at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK218239/>.

⁷ “1 Who are the Homeless?”, pp. 12-13.



Homeless Runaway and Throwaway Youths: Less is known about homeless youth, because few runaways seek help in shelters. Researchers have confirmed that “most adolescents start running away some years before they start to use shelters.”⁸ As many as 17% of youth on the streets left home the first time because their parents had evicted them.⁹

Homeless Elderly People: Less than 10% of the homeless population is made up of the elderly. This may be because of the services and entitlements available to those over the age of 65.

Veterans: HUD records that almost 38,000 veterans were homeless on one night in 2018. Overall, almost 9% of the homeless are veterans.¹⁰

The Rural Homeless: The needs of the rural homeless are distinctly different than those of the urban homeless. Rural homeless are “far less visible than those in the cities; many live with relatives or others who are part of an extended family network.”¹¹ Those in rural areas tend to become somewhat hidden from view, living in cars, abandoned buildings and the woods.¹²

8 “1 Who are the Homeless?”, p. 16.

9 “1 Who are the Homeless?”, p. 17.

10 “Veterans,”

11 “1 Who are the Homeless?”, p. 19.

12 “1 Who are the Homeless?”, pp. 19-20; Jake Bittle Twitter, “The ‘Hidden’ Crisis of Rural Homelessness,” 28 March 2019, p. 3, <https://www.thenation.com/article/rural-homelessness-housing/>.

Discover the Needs in your Community

Before you begin any new ministry, it is important to first take time to discover and understand the unique needs within your community. Explore the physical community, listen to and learn from people living and working in the area and seek God's guidance by prayer-driving and prayer-walking the neighborhood.

If preparing your church to develop a ministry to help fight homelessness is a need in your community and a desire within your congregation, keep reading! We have practical steps to help you get started.

To learn more about how to identify needs in your community, download [*How Can You Serve? An In-Depth Guide to Discovering Community Needs.*](#)

If not, [check out some of our other ministry guides](#) for opportunities that fit for your church's gifting and community's needs.



The Hub's Ministry for the Homeless

Grace in the City Church has developed the Hub as a Community Resource Center to minister to the homeless and vulnerable adults and youth of Downtown Minneapolis. The church is open seven days a week in order to provide resources and necessary provisions to the downtown community. The church operates the Hub as a “donation-based business model.”

Grace in the City Church is strategically located in Downtown Minneapolis and started a ministry through opening a coffee shop specifically for homeless. Since that small beginning, the ministry has grown, taking over the entire first floor of its building and its basement. The Hub operates with volunteers from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Monday-Saturday, and the church offers ministries five nights a week.

Through the Hub, Grace in the City Church offers:

- A place of refuge and safety
- A place where people can seek freedom from the bondage of addiction and homelessness
- Access to many local treatment centers and local sober living housing options
- A computer lab where people can search for employment opportunities along with other available benefits
- Mission/volunteer opportunities for local and out of state churches/individuals
- Local assistance with bus tokens
- Clothing through its clothes closet.

In Minneapolis, an average of 720 homeless sleep on the Minneapolis streets nightly, while thousands more are sleeping in shelters. Those who are fortunate to have beds are required to leave the shelters each morning and can only return at night. The Hub provides a place of safety and comfort for these homeless as well as those who sleep on the streets.

Grace in the City Church works through many local partners, such as: the Minneapolis Police Department, YouthLink, St. Vincent De Paul food provider, Loaves and Fishes food provider, Salvation Army Rehabilitation Center and Metro Hope Treatment Center for men and women. Together, they address the issues of homelessness, addiction, hunger and brokenness, in order to change the landscape of their city, one soul at a time.

John Steger, senior pastor of the church, explains, “By providing these necessary benefits to those in need, we have the opportunity to share the love of Christ with all of them. When this happens, we begin to see transformation and see families that were torn apart brought back together, all through the love of Christ.”¹³

The Grace in the City Church provides a huge program for the homeless that thrives due to its downtown location and facility. Your church may not have the same kind of location or facilities, but it can still play an important role in ministering to the homeless.

¹³ John Steger, Senior Pastor, Grace in the City Church; at <https://www.graceinthecity.org>.

Pastor Steger outlines the steps Grace in the City Church used to begin this ministry:

1. The church answered God's call to begin this ministry.
2. The church used their location in their ministry planning.
3. The church sought support from other agencies and churches in the community.
4. The church recognized the need to be longsuffering in this ministry, understanding up front that success would come slowly.
5. The church developed relationships within the local community.
6. The church created financial partnerships with local and out-of-state churches.
7. The church developed a structure of leadership, volunteers, and resource.

Pastor Steger points out that building relationships and trust takes times, at least before the ministry began to see fruit. He explains that church partners have been a must for their ministry.



Strategically Consider Ministry Opportunities with the Homeless

If the call to work with the homeless is beginning to resonate, take the next step by enlisting a small group of people within the congregation to assess ministry opportunities by working through the following questions:

- **What partnerships in your community could you contact for help to meet this need?** These could include government officials, school officials and teachers, other community churches and leaders, local homeless shelters and foodbanks and other preestablished programs providing help and support to the homeless.
- **What ministries in your community could you partner with to meet this need?** These could include other community churches, community leaders, local civic clubs and homeless ministries.
- **Who in your church is passionate and equipped to lead or participate in this ministry?** Consider children's workers, parents, Sunday school classes, senior adults—anyone with a desire to help provide resources or serve as volunteers.
- **What resources and relationships has God given your church to support this ministry?** Consider missions offerings, other financial resources, church members who are connected to local schools and community groups and Sunday school class members. One untapped resource could be those who have the gift of couponing and saving money on necessary supplies for the ministry.
- **What resources have you identified that could work collaboratively with your church to help fight homelessness?** These questions can lead this small group of members to determine whether or not:
 1. There is desire within the congregation to meet this need.
 2. There are resources of people, space, and money to meet this need.
 3. This ministry is sustainable over time.
 4. You feel God leading your congregation in this direction.

Ministry Strategy for Working with the Homeless

Your ministry to the homeless can look very different than that of Grace in the City Church's, but can still bring help to the homeless in your community. The success of any ministry is dependent upon the preparation and organization that takes place before the ministry begins. Begin with the steps outlined above in "[Strategically Consider Ministry Opportunities with the Homeless.](#)"

God may be moving you to be the catalyst of developing partnerships to minister to the homeless in your community. If so, where do you start? We've provided six steps that can lead you to successfully meeting this much-needed ministry:

1. **Pray.** Spend time in prayer. Enlist prayer warriors to pray with you for God's guidance and wisdom. Only when you have a clear understanding that God is calling you to this work should you move forward.
2. **Learn everything you can about homelessness in America and in your community.** Research the needs and issues of homelessness in America. Two resources to get you started are: [Homeless, Health, and Human Needs](#) and information on resources, programs, and legislation from the [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services](#).
3. **Listen to those in your target area who are homeless.** Find out what they see as their biggest need. Get advice from those already involved with the homeless, and then go to the areas where the homeless gather, and start a conversation. Perhaps you could offer something small, such as a granola bar or an orange or bagel to get a conversation started. It is best to go two by two, and it is often better to spend more time hearing the concerns, rather than speaking.
4. **Meet with local organizations who are involved with the homeless locally.** Find out what is being done and what help is needed. Carefully determine which organization meets the ministry needs your congregation has identified. If there are no local groups already involved in ministering to the homeless, move outward geographically by looking for possible ministry partners in your state, region, or nation.
5. **Ask for advice from those already involved with working with the homeless.** Do something small. Take some food to a place where a small group of homeless may be gathered. If possible, take time to eat with them, not just give food to them. It is best to go at least two by two. Afterward, evaluate as you pray about the next step.
6. **Research governmental efforts on the local, state and national levels.** Find out what is being done and what help and/or support these agencies need.
7. **Enlist volunteers to lead the church's efforts.** You'll need volunteers who are passionate about the plight of the homeless, are willing to work to end homelessness and have a desire to help the homeless.
8. **Based on your findings, lead the team of volunteers to create a plan for building these partnerships and a budget for making this happen.**

The work in homeless ministry can include any or all of these four strategies:

1. Developing awareness of the causes for and needs of the homeless locally and nationally through educational programming and community efforts

- Start a coalition of churches to work together to fight homelessness.
- Reach out to your local media (TV, radio and newspapers) about focusing attention on the local issues of homelessness.

2. Supporting organizations that provide assistance to the homeless

- If safe shelter is not available for the homeless, consider working with other churches to develop a facility to meet their immediate needs.
- Become a source of supplies and resources for your local shelters by collecting food, clothing, hygiene items, cleaning supplies, household items and bedding.
- Host a fund raiser that brings attention to the plight of the homeless and raises funds to support local shelters.
- Create a resource manual to keep in your church office for referrals and to hand out to the homes, and include numbers for these often-requested services for the homeless:
 - Medical assistance
 - Mental health services and counseling
 - Shelter
 - Legal/immigration services
 - Transportation
- Provide Bibles, devotional guides and other encouraging literature to the homeless. For an inexpensive paperback edition that also includes the plan of salvation and can be purchased at a discount in bulk, see the Time to Revive Bible ([New Testament only](#) or [complete Bible](#)). Spanish editions are also available.
- Provide GED classes for homeless who didn't complete high school.

3. Coordinating efforts to reform laws and policies that govern how the homeless can be helped

- Learn about laws for the homeless on both your state and the national level.
- Learn about government systems such as the [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services](#) and the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#).
- Explore how your church can help the government systems when they have no resources for specific situations.
- Join the homeless task force in your community.
- Research national organizations and join their mailing lists to keep informed on the fight against homelessness. Some possibilities include:
 - [National Coalition for the Homeless](#)
 - [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#)
 - [National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty](#)
 - [National Network for Youth](#)
 - [National Runaway Safeline](#)

Ministry with the homeless can also begin individually. Stephanie Watson points out how you can help the homeless through these critical actions¹⁴:

Volunteer:

Many opportunities for working with the homeless are already in place. Possibilities include:

1. Help a local shelter with collecting and distributing clothes, preparing and serving meals, providing entertainment for children and families, answering phones, or recruiting and coordinating volunteers.
2. [Habitat for Humanity](#) depends upon volunteers and financial resources.
3. Visit the [National Coalition for the Homeless](#) to find local agencies that work with the homeless.

Donate:

Shelters and agencies depend upon donations. Contact individual shelters and agencies to see what their specific needs are. These could include:

- Clothes, toys, books, household goods, toiletries or computers for local shelters that you're not using.
- Community-wide clothing drive, food drive, book drive, toy drive or toiletries drive to collect new and lightly used items.

***Note:** In some urban areas, items such as fast food gift certificates or bus tokens can be sold for quick cash by people struggling with addiction. With this in mind, clothing articles and toiletries may be preferable for donations.

Homeless individuals on the streets also need donations. Instead of cash, provide:

1. Fast-food gift certificates for food
2. Bus tokens for transportation
3. Cold-weather gear such as gloves, hats and blankets
4. Survival packages that include personal toiletries, wet wipes and tissues
5. Create a list of resources (with addresses and phone numbers) available locally for the homeless and give the list to the homeless you meet.

Advocate:

Become aware of homeless needs in your community and the laws that govern the homeless. Contact your local representatives about new legislation to help the homeless.

¹⁴ Stephanie Watson, "What Can You Do to Help the Homeless"; available at <https://money.howstuffworks.com/homeless6.htm>.

Employ:

Hire homeless people at your company or consider how to develop internships and employment opportunities for the homeless.

Respect:

Be kind to the homeless on the street. Don't look away from them on the street but acknowledge their presence. David Pirtle explains, "Most of the despair in being homeless comes from being treated like you don't exist. If you see the same guy on the street corner every day, find out his name and talk to him. It might save his life."¹⁵ Also, as we get to know the person on the street, it is often a good practice to have men work with men and women work with women.

¹⁵ David Pirtle, quoted in "How Homelessness Works," at <https://money.howstuffworks.com/homeless6.htm>.





How to Pray for the Homeless

The first step of this and any new ministry is to develop a prayer team to undergird the ministry in prayer. However, every believer can be involved in praying for the homeless, praying both globally and locally. Consider creating a prayer emphasis that leads the church in united prayer for the homeless and for developing ministries to them in America. Prayer needs include:

- Pray for the needs of the homeless living in temporary shelters and on the street, including shelter, food, water and safety.
- Pray for the government workers who are involved meeting the needs of the homeless.
- Pray for healing for the homeless who have experienced traumas we can only imagine.
- Pray for the homeless to be open to God's saving grace.
- Pray for churches and workers who are at work helping the homeless
- Pray for an outpouring of love and concern for all those who are homeless.

Conclusion

Throughout scripture, God has called the church to care for the hurting around us. James 1:27 calls us to take care of the poor and the widows. Proverbs 19:17 calls us to be kind to the poor as a loan to the Lord. And Jesus told His followers that when they cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the displaced, the unclothed, the sick and the imprisoned, it was the same as if they had directly cared for Him (Matthew 25:40). It's also notable that in Matthew 8:20 and 1 Corinthians 4:11 respectively, the two major figures in the New Testament — Jesus and Paul — both describe themselves as homeless.

Why is the Bible so specific on the need to care for the hurting, and struggling, and, often, the invisible around us? Because God has called us to share the love of the Gospel with the entire world (Matthew 28:18-20, Galatians 5:14). Because our God loves them just as completely as He loves us (James 2:15-17).

WHAT'S NEXT?

Is God calling you to take up the mission to those who are homeless in your community?



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