

# Group urges respectful approach to panhandlers



[Jim Collar](#), USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 6:02 p.m. CDT May 25, 2016

Encounters with panhandlers leave some annoyed and others uncomfortable.

Yet it's here, it's permissible and advocates suggest a thoughtful approach could yield some positive impacts.

"We should put focus on helping where it makes most sense to help," said Joe Mauthe, president of the Fox Cities Housing Coalition.

The coalition last week released a set of recommendations in the event someone comes across a panhandler. Street-side requests for money have prompted heated debate in recent months. Panhandling has become a regular sight in Grand Chute's commercial corridor.



(Photo: Wm. Glasheen/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

The coalition has representation from more than 30 agencies, with a goal of ensuring decent, affordable housing in the Fox Cities. Residents have reached out to its members asking about the best ways to respond to panhandling.

Police and community leaders have urged caution. They said they've encountered a number of panhandlers who've misrepresented their situations to earn sympathy — and money, and they have turned down other forms of assistance.

Housing leaders are concerned about the potential for acrimony toward the less fortunate.

Scott Peeples, executive director of the Fox Valley Warming Shelter, led a five-member committee on the issue. He said they weren't looking for any hard and fast solutions.

"I don't think that's what the situation demands," he said. "I think it's an opportunity to give people some understanding."

The committee took no position on whether those compelled to give to panhandlers should do so. "It makes some people feel good," Peeples said.

The committee urged that people consider safety and be aware of their surroundings before engaging with a panhandler. Those who are concerned might instead donate to or volunteer for one of the many organizations working on behalf of people living in poverty.

They recommend that residents mention the United Way's 211 resource referral line. A call could lead those in need to food and shelter, emergency financial assistance and other resources.

“When we can get someone to seek help through organized and professional resources, that’s the best solution,” Mauthe said. “That’s where we can do the most good.”

Their top recommendation is to exercise understanding. Some panhandlers might take advantage and others might not put donations to the best uses, Mauthe said, but he urged against making assumptions. “We don’t know their stories. We see a person holding a sign.”

The coalition conducted a major study last year to learn more about homelessness in the region and its root causes. Project RUSH – or Research to Understand and Solve Homelessness – found mental and physical health were significant factors. It included interviews of more than 500 individuals experiencing or on the verge of homelessness. Of them, 57 percent had a mental illness. Nearly half had a health condition that limits the type or amount of work they can do. Other factors identified included childhood trauma and substance abuse.

Everyone out there asking for money has a story and a struggle.

“At the end, what really matters to us is that we’re at all times treating people with respect and dignity,” Mauthe said.

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