What Should I Do When I Meet a Homeless Individual?
Q&A with LuAnn Oros, Community Consultant on Hunger & Homelessness

Why are there so many homeless people around the university and U-City?
Actually, many people who are homeless are aware that most of the free social services offered to them (for food and shelter) are located in the downtown area. Most often when a homeless person chooses to hold a sign or come to the university area, it’s because they are hoping to receive money from students and area residents.

Should I give money to someone who is homeless?
The simple answer is “no”. With so many of us today not carrying cash, it’s not unreasonable to let them know you don’t have any cash. Although we would hope that they would use the cash for the purpose they’re asking – food – there is no guarantee that this is what the money would be used for. Many homeless people remain homeless because of an addiction to alcohol and/or drugs, so giving money enables them to continue in this addiction.

What if someone is asking for money because they are hungry?
The truth is that there are many places that serve meals daily to people who are homeless or food insecure. Individuals can Operation Food Search to locate emergency food in any St. Louis area zip code (314.726.5355 – press #3), or locate other hunger relief information via www.211missouri.org (dial 2-1-1).

One of the organizations that serves meals every day and could give someone something to eat immediately upon their arrival is The Bridge, located at 1610 Olive Street, 63103 (314.421.3136). They also have many services that a person who is homeless would find valuable such as hot showers, access to social service agencies and ability to use their location as a permanent mailing address.

Another option, if there is a restaurant or grocery store nearby, would be to ask if you could buy them a meal or purchase them some groceries. You can also keep granola bars, cheese crackers and water in your car or backpack and give them out. If a person is truly hungry, they welcome this offer of kindness.
I feel uncomfortable when people with signs by the side of the road look right at me. It feels strange, what should I do?
You can look back at them, smile and nod your head or wave to acknowledge that you’ve seen them. You should not feel guilty about not giving them a donation. If you are approached by a person while walking, you can smile, introduce yourself, ask their name and then proceed with all of the above suggestions. Sometimes it can feel like they won’t take no for an answer, but if you look right into their eyes and say “I really can’t...no” that is usually the end of it.

If someone needs a place to stay, what should I tell them?
You can give them the number of the Housing Resource Center, associated with Catholic Charities St. Louis. They have current, frequently updated information about the exact number of beds each emergency shelter in St. Louis has for any given night. The number is 314.241-5060, and they can call 8am-5pm. By 5pm all available shelter beds are usually taken each evening. They can also call the United Way’s emergency hot line at 2-1-1 which can offer resource information for a variety of services for individuals who are marginalized and need immediate help.

What are things I should be cautious about?
Although we have a tendency to always want to help those less fortunate, there are a few things that I would recommend you NEVER do without thinking it through entirely:
1) Don’t offer to take someone home with you.
2) Don’t offer to give someone a ride in your vehicle if you are alone.
3) Don’t give someone your address or phone number.
4) Don’t believe every story you may be told.
5) If you choose to do any of the things listed above anyway, before you do, please tell someone or email Lu Oros in the CSO Office (luann.oros@wustl.edu) and include your phone number. Lu will email or call ASAP.