

HOMELESS

in Springfield- PART VIII

GUIDELINES FOR GROWTH



When we started working at Inner City Mission in 1993, we had twelve rooms to house homeless children, their parents, and single women. The average room size was ten-by-twelve, and each room had a closet, a set of bunk beds, a chest of drawers, and a lamp.

During those early years, we had to turn down 245 requests on average per year from people needing shelter. In later years, the number of requests for our services increased, so we added eight more rooms. That brought our total to twenty rooms. These past five years, we have had to turn down approximately 850 requests for each year.

While it's heartbreaking to turn anyone away—especially children—we employ a clear-cut approach when bringing people in.

We have expectations set in place.

After saying “no” to so many people needing our help, we realize the people who come have an advantage. They have a room that many others wish they had, and they can relax in an atmosphere of God's love with caring people on staff who want the best for them.

We believe every person coming to our facility has arrived in God's perfect timing, and we hope residents can view their time at the mission as a privilege. Once their initial chaos settles down, we encourage residents to take advantage of their time here. Then we lay out expectations that can help them move forward in life.

We have three main expectations, and all three have to do with attitude. Why attitude? We have found that attitude sets the direction for life. Positive or negative, attitude is the first thing other people notice about us. It determines the type of relationships we can develop, the kind of employment we can acquire, and the type of housing we can dwell in.

Attitude speaks louder than words.

We pay special attention to our new arrivals. Can they take direction? Are they willing to fulfill menial tasks and chores? Will they uphold our safe environment? Are they considerate to others? Do they spend time with their children

Many of the people coming to us for shelter have attitude issues. However, if they are willing to take guidance, we can help them develop a better attitude as expectations turn into reality.

Top Three Expectations

1. Taking responsibility

People who take responsibility for their actions—as well as their children's actions—go further in life. They accomplish more and doors open for them. Showing a humble attitude, admitting a mistake, and owning up to consequences speak volumes. Those unable to do this, or refusing to do this, spend their time blaming others and

miss out on life's lessons. They gaze at lost opportunities, wondering why they pass by.

For the vast majority of our traumatic homeless residents, it wasn't their fault. They had parents who treated them harshly. They learned as children to duck and flee to escape more pain. Earlier, we mentioned a woman whose father insisted she steal cigarettes for him. If she failed to come back with the right kind, or when she got caught, he would use her body as an ashtray, extinguishing cigarette butts on her arms and legs.

Circumstances like hers are difficult to overcome. Yet at some point, the person must learn to forgive and move on. As callous as that sounds, it is to their great benefit to release the people who have harmed them and take responsibility for their own adult life. This act of forgiveness and humility opens the way for them to develop a positive attitude that moves them forward in life.

2. Respecting Authority

Residents refusing to obey our basic house rules, who turn their back on any type of guidance, who treat others with disdain, reveal right away why they are homeless. They have a major attitude issue that prevents them from submitting or answering to anyone. That includes an employer, a landlord, a policeman, or anyone in charge. Authority and rules have become the enemy.

Some of our traumatic homeless carry this kind of attitude. Those who refuse to change their ways can fall into chronic homelessness if they reject the confines of a shelter, and prefer living on the street in “freedom.”

In order to recognize those we can help, we ask new arrivals to live within the guidelines of the shelter handbook. Their response decides whether we can house them or not. If they hesitate or balk in any way, we explain that safety is our foremost concern—and if they cannot follow our guidelines, they won't be staying. For those who are willing, we take them through the handbook and talk about our basic rules for safe living in a communal setting.

Our hope, of course, is that every person can submit to authority in order to live peaceably with others in society. Most of our traumatic homeless need help in this area. Some tell us right away it's no problem, but then ignore our guidelines. We take each person individually and try to help them move past this issue.

3. Living in Gratitude and Contentment

We live in a country that has been blessed, even to the point of excess. The residents we work with are seen as some of the poorest in our country, yet they are considered wealthy when compared to the world standard.

If you live in a two-person household in the United

States and make under \$16,910.00 a year, you are living in poverty. It's estimated that 43 million people in our country are living in poverty at this time. In farther reaches of the world, a two-person household making under \$1,387.00 is considered poverty-stricken. It's estimated that 734 million people live in this type of poverty worldwide.

We are blessed to live in a country that does not have people starving to death. What we have instead, is “food insecurity,” which, defined in Webster's Dictionary, means “unable to consistently access or afford adequate food.” However, in other countries across the globe, it is estimated that 9 million people die of starvation each year.

When residents complain about a lack of something physical, we remind them of the blessings we all enjoy in America. Yes, they are lacking some of the “stuff” others have in our country, but there are more important resources they need to acquire first, such as **relational** and **inner resources**. As these are built, they can begin to obtain and maintain the physical resources that are missing.

In the meantime, we present the idea of being content. Now is not forever, we explain, and we encourage living life with an eternal perspective, which brings peace of mind and contentment in difficult circumstances.

We bring to light other expectations and hopes for our residents as they work through personal issues and set life goals. Things like honesty, positive communication with others, willingness to take constructive criticism or advice, avoidance of gossip and chaos, recognition of personal strengths and weaknesses, desire to help others in need, and setting healthy boundaries.

These expectations are what we call Guidelines for Growth. They are practical, relevant ways a person can develop a good attitude while living out the life-giving fruit of God's spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Until next time,

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