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Tuesday, May 18, 2004

Outreach beats handout

Panhandling: City regulation up for renewal

By Jane Prendergast
The Cincinnati Enquirer

DOWNTOWN - The man in the Reese's T-shirt with disheveled black hair hanging out from under his hat sits along Fourth Street with his plastic cup and this sign: "Please Help."

Phillip Garcia might look like he's homeless, but he's not. The 43-year-old who smiles through mostly missing teeth has a place to live now - a Walnut Hills group home for mentally ill people. It's much better, he says, than the Cincinnati streets and bridges he lived on and under for 15 years.



Brent Chasteen, right, a social service outreach coordinator for DCI, talks with panhandler Phillip Garcia along Fourth Street.

(Gary Landers photo)

Garcia is a registered panhandler, required now by a Cincinnati law that city officials today will discuss renewing. A year old, the law now allows police to arrest anyone who doesn't have a permit to ask passersby for money or anyone who is panhandling aggressively. City officials must renew the law, or it expires next month.

Councilmen David Pepper and Pat DeWine both favor renewing the ordinance. Pepper, chairman of the Law & Public Safety Committee whose members will talk about the ordinance this afternoon, said: "Why mess with success?"

Numbers of tickets police wrote for violating the panhandling ordinance were unavailable Monday. Lt. Doug Wiesman of the Downtown Services Unit was sorting through the tickets in order to explain to city officials how many arrests were for unregistered panhandling and how many were for aggressive panhandling.

Proponents say the law is working because of Brent Chasteen. Chasteen is the outreach social service coordinator who works

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for Downtown Cincinnati Inc, which created the job last summer in conjunction with the law as a way to offer social services to panhandlers. Since last summer, he's been walking downtown streets almost daily. He uses the ordinance as a way to approach panhandlers:

"Do you have a panhandling license?"

From there, he asks if panhandlers if they know where they can get a hot meal. And, eventually, he helps some seek other services, like housing and treatment for mental illness or substance abuse.

His statistics show he has made contact with 204 panhandlers, 78 of whom are off the streets. But he's careful to explain that the numbers are fluid; many panhandlers have mental health and/or substance abuse problems and often float back onto the streets.

On a walk around downtown Monday, the three panhandlers Chasteen encounters in an hour know him. One isn't happy to see him at all, accusing Chasteen of harassment. Then the man moves along. Chasteen's worried the man has stopped taking his medication for mental illness.

On the interstate exit ramp at Fifth Street, Chasteen finds Terry Boston, a 55-year-old man who says he "went psycho" when his wife of 27 years died two years ago. Boston sits on the guardrail, hoping drivers offer money. He proudly fishes down deep in his pants pocket, pulling out Chasteen's business card, proving he's still thinking about Chasteen's offer to help him get to Florida to be with relatives.

Chasteen, 42, has been in the social service business for almost a decade, working with homeless men and mentally ill people.

"I think I've proven that they can trust me, and that I'll do what I say," he says, walking away from Boston. "You have to build that trust."

Chasteen calls the panhandlers his "clients." Some, like Garcia, need more ongoing help than others. Garcia left his treatment program, but Chasteen - with help from other outreach workers with mental health service agencies PATH and CRI - helped him get back in. Now Garcia's on his way to getting a permanent home with Tender Mercies, another social services agency.

Still, panhandlers annoy people downtown.

PANHANDLING LAW

- Requires panhandlers to register with the city and carry their photo identification and permit with them.
- Panhandlers who violate the law by being too aggressive can have their permit revoked. Those without a permit face possible arrest and fines.
- Council must vote to keep it in place. Council's Law & Public Safety committee discusses it this afternoon.

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"They approach my customers while they're in line," said Tracy Smith, who mans the hot dog cart outside the Westin Hotel across from Fountain Square. "And then they'll go, 'Oh, I'm sorry, my bad.' But then they'll just do it again."

No officials expected the law to end panhandling. The reasons people beg for money, Chasteen says, are way too complicated for a simple fix.

With some, like the man many downtowners know as "Pokemon" often seen panhandling around Fifth and Walnut streets, Chasteen's victories are smaller. Pokemon now has an apartment, so he no longer needs to push all his possessions along in a grocery cart.

"People hated seeing that cart," Chasteen says. "So that's something."

"Sometimes, it's one thing at a time."

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