

Are donation machines the key to ending panhandling in New Bedford?

Take a ride through New Bedford and chances are you'll pass a few panhandlers with signs asking for money. They seem to be standing on every busy intersection in the city. The most lucrative spots even cause turf wars with panhandlers assaulting each other, sometimes with a weapon. The number of panhandlers in New Bedford have grown in number because word spreads and a migration of sorts occurs, drawing more of them into the city. The reverse is possible.

Last year I wrote an article, Don't blame the panhandlers, blame the people that give to them. If everyone suddenly stopped giving panhandlers money, they number of panhandlers in New Bedford would be significantly reduced or eliminated. Or do you think they would just hang out at a busy intersection with nothing to show for it?

The reality is, while some use the money to survive, many, if not most, use the money for drugs and alcohol. The increase in panhandlers coming to New Bedford is likely a contributing factor to the 75% increase in drug overdoses the city in 2016.

While people that give to panhandlers have good intentions, there is a good chance they are simply enabling addiction and attracting more panhandlers to New Bedford. How would you feel if you bought the heroin that caused the overdose death of a panhandler?

There is an alternative to make sure your funds goes to food and housing: donation machines.

The City, or a non-profit organization, should set up donation

machines at key spots throughout New Bedford. These machines are like parking/change machines, but the funds go to services for the poor. They could be set up so those donating could select where their money goes – a pantry, a homeless shelter, a transition house or service.

See a panhandler and feel bad? Pull over, give some money to the machine and the funds will go to a local charity. This will ensure that you are contributing to feeding, clothing or housing people, not feeding their addiction.

In Spain, charities installed solidarity machines to boost food bank donations with great results. These machines can get food and services to those most in need while reducing the number of panhandlers. The panhandlers who are truly in need of services will get help and those just looking to feed their habit will move on.

It's time to try something different because the growing panhandling numbers are not subsiding. When you give to a panhandler you do not know where the money goes, but with these machines you will.