

Panhandling – A Closer Look



Anecdotally, panhandling seems to be on the rise in Asylum Hill, in fact, in all of Hartford. But it turns out it's not just us. Reports around the country indicate it's a problem almost everywhere. There are a number of difficulties with panhandling. From a neighborhood perspective it's like littering, a symptom of neglect. It's one more thing that tells both residents and visitors that this is not a healthy community. In a healthy community asking a stranger for occasional help should be no big deal. Change for a parking meter, like a cup of sugar to bake a cake is a part of community, being a neighbor. That's not what we have here. The isolation is much greater as is the need.

So when someone stops you on the way into a neighborhood store or ATM, despite their ask, a few dollars is most often not really what they need, certainly not all they need. It's a lot more than that and so the giving needs to be more as well.

As it's hard to imagine that panhandling is anyone's career choice, it's also hard to imagine that anyone could do it day by day and not lose all self-respect.

Whenever we're confronted by someone panhandling, I think most of us respond with a combination of emotions. For me, it's a combination of annoyance, compassion, guilt and frustration in no particular order. Annoyance, because I know what it does to the perception of Asylum Hill and Hartford that we're trying so hard to change. Compassion, because I really would like to help this person. Guilt, because no matter what I do, it seems it's not really helping. Frustration because I really don't know what the right response is.

In researching the problem, I came across a paper titled *Preventing Panhandling* from the Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center. In it they point out that "Enforcing laws against panhandling plays a relatively small role in controlling the problem. Public education to discourage donations, and providing adequate access and availability of social services –

especially treatment for drug or alcohol abuse - are more effective tactics in a comprehensive community response to panhandling.”

It seems to make sense that in a neighborhood with as many social service agencies and nonprofits as Asylum Hill has, adequate access and availability shouldn't be the main problem. Public education along with an alternative to cash might make more of a difference. In the coming months we'll continue to look into this issue to see what can be done.

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