

Responding to Panhandlers

By Annette Wuertz, former leader in NAC - Quality of Life Task Team

District Five residents clearly care about improving quality of life for all in our District Five community. At the November 2004 meeting, over 200 residents weighed in on issues that matter. Quality of life concerns were a top interest. District Five's Neighborhood Action Committee (NAC) leaders are taking action through the NAC - Quality of Life Task Team – a group of volunteers leading to build a strong community. A problem with panhandling was identified – so local leader Annette Wuertz and her team took on the challenge to learn more about what individuals can do if faced with this issue. Working with the St. Paul police, business owners and residents she compiled the following tips.

Tips on dealing with panhandlers:

Panhandlers will use whatever strategy works. One involves asking for spare change. Another may request money to assist with a “problem”. Others may offer unwanted “assistance” to exploit your sense of obligation.

To garner your sympathy:

“Ma’am (or sir) I need your help. My car just ran out of gas four blocks from here and I need a little money for gas. I just lost my job.”

To create a sense of urgency:

“I need get to my 10-month-old daughter to the hospital right away because her face is all red, and her clothes are pretty wet because she’s sweating so badly. We’re afraid that she’s got a really bad fever.”

To tug at your sense of obligation:

“May I help you load those groceries?” while violating your personal “space”, perhaps walking along with you to your car.

There are as many distress stories as there are panhandlers, and they are usually based on minor tragedies geared to touch your heart...and your wallet.

The success of panhandlers undermines a community because it encourages the practice, and the number of panhandlers. Aggressive panhandlers may scare people, causing them to avoid businesses where panhandlers hang out. This is why if you have been approached or accosted by panhandlers near a particular business, it is important to report it to the business owner or manager. Stores can't combat panhandling unless they know it is a issue affecting customers.

Tips on responding to panhandlers:

.Just say "no". Don't engage and ignore them.

.If they persist, loudly say "No" several times. Panhandlers don't like to draw attention.

.Walk away. If you are followed, retreat to the nearest business and report the incident.

.Act confident; your attitude is a powerful tool in dealing with panhandlers.

.If you feel threatened by a panhandler, don't hesitate to call 911.

The bottom line, if people stop giving money to panhandlers, panhandling will stop.