

I'm Just a Student—What Can I Do to Help?

The short answer is plenty! You may not realize it, but there are lots of ways that you can become involved with helping the homeless. Here are some ideas of what you can do now.

Be an advocate and volunteer with an organization that serves homeless people.

Advocacy means working on behalf of homeless people to bring about positive changes in policies and programs, on the local, state, and federal levels. There are many ways that you can get involved with advocacy initiatives:

1. Call, write letters, or visit your public officials and ask them what they are doing to address homelessness and poverty issues. Encourage your public officials to make homelessness and poverty their top priorities. Your class can organize a letter writing campaign and you can encourage family and friends to do the same.
2. Become a member of NEOCH; a donation of \$35 can help 3 people with a winter blanket to survive their homelessness.
3. Volunteer at the local Homeless Coalition (NEOCH) and become involved with their advocacy campaigns. Or coordinate a fundraiser at your church or school. One of the most popular fundraisers for students are “sleep outs,” you raise donations and sleep outside for one night in a cardboard box. If you are interested in coordinating this fundraiser contact the Coalition at 216/432-0540 ext 103.

Collect donations and volunteer for a shelter.

Many shelters need items such as new clothing and hygiene products to distribute to their clients. Having appropriate clothing and hygiene products is important for job interviews and for doing just about anything in today's society. There are some general guidelines to follow before you begin a donation drive:

1. Identify the shelter or organization for which you want to collect items. The Street Card is an excellent resource for locating an agency located on the NEOCH website. There are also many projects that shelters have identified, and you can find those on the NEOCH website under “Direct Service Opportunities.”
2. Talk to the shelter first and find out what items they need. Do not assume that the organization needs clothing—most organizations do not have space to store clothing or they may have strict guidelines about what types of clothing items they can accept. Many organizations may need items such as towels or soap or socks instead.

Stay Educated!

This is perhaps the most important thing that you can do—stay educated about issues around homelessness nationally and locally. You cannot help solve the problem if you do not know that the problem is! The internet makes this very easy plus there are other resources at your fingertips:

1. For national news on homelessness the National Coalition for the Homeless has an excellent web site <http://www.nationalhomeless.org>. This site will give you information regarding legislation, national campaigns, and probably any facts and statistics you ever wanted to know. This site also has a directory of homeless Coalitions all across the country and numerous links to other web sites.
2. For local information you can contact the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless (NEOCH). They can help with local speakers or even setting up tours of the shelters. NEOCH also has a comprehensive web site that is an excellent resource for information on homelessness <http://www.neoch.org>. The website has research, advocacy, profiles, a blog and copies of all the NEOCH reports.
3. Read the *Street Chronicle* street newspaper. This is a newspaper published by NEOCH that contains articles written by homeless people, formerly homeless people, staff, and members of the community. This is an excellent way to keep up on the subject of homelessness. There is usually a *Chronicle* vendor at the West Side Market, but if you cannot find a vendor you can request a copy from NEOCH at 216/432-0540.
4. Look for books on homelessness at your local library. Some excellent books written about homelessness include: *Tell Them Who I Am-Elliot Liebow, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America-Jonathan Kozol, * The Visible Poor: Homelessness in the United States-Hoel Blau *No Place to Be: Voices of Homeless Children- Judith Berck
5. Talk to homeless people. If you do not know anyone who is homeless you can arrange a visit to a shelter, meal site or drop in center to simply sit and talk with someone about what it is like to be homeless. This is probably one of the best things you can do to educate yourself about the topic. You can also ask NEOCH to help you arrange a meeting with homeless people.

SHARE WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS!!!