

Anti-panhandling Movement Grows in Northern California



Earl Allen Boek protests anti-panhandling campaign in Redding, CA (screen grab from <http://www.redding.com/videos/detail/anti-panhandling-protester/>).

Redding, CA—Poverty has been a problem throughout human history. For centuries, the poor and the homeless have often turned to begging, often referred to as “panhandling,” to solicit money from people. This practice continues today, and panhandlers are often found in areas where people congregate, such as town centers, crowded sidewalks, parking lots, or shopping malls.

Although this problem has been mostly limited to large cities, rural areas are starting to see an increase in the number of transient and homeless people. This has created problems for rural towns, and some policies of the larger cities may not have helped the situation. One case is the city of Redding, Calif., a small city of 90,000 residents in the center of the far northern part of the state. Many in the city have recently begun a campaign against panhandling, and there is proposed legislation that would make it illegal.

Redding hosts many panhandlers due to the city’s location, climate, and accessibility. It has been reported that in 2011, a total of 2,213 individuals were homeless in Redding at some point during the year. Also, 983 individuals were at-risk of becoming homeless. At least 773 of these individuals were children.

Redding has homeless shelters, service agencies, and churches that provide meals, clothing, and necessities throughout the city. But it is estimated that only 30 percent of the homeless and the indigent (extremely poor) are taking advantage of available services. Panhandling continues to grow.

Opponents of panhandling cite several problems with it. One issue is that it annoys many residents. Individuals frequently find themselves the target of panhandling requests. In response, several businesses and individuals have organized an anti-panhandling campaign called “Handouts Don’t Help.” The leaders of this effort discourage people from giving money directly to panhandlers. Instead, they encourage people to donate to organizations that provide shelter, food, drug counseling, medical care, and rehabilitation services to the homeless and the poor. This, the campaign argues, would help lead panhandlers to seek assistance from organizations such as the Salvation Army, homeless shelters, churches, and aid groups.

These opponents of panhandling say that money given to panhandlers is frequently used to buy alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs. The Handouts Don’t Help campaign has asked stores and businesses to display a poster showing a homeless man holding a sign that says, “Don’t Feed My Habits.” The campaign is attempting to persuade the public to refocus their good intentions.

Another issue for the community is safety. Some panhandlers stand in the middle of busy intersections to solicit money from motorists stopped at traffic lights. Because cars speed through the intersections, such panhandling is dangerous. This has led another group of citizens to ask city officials to look at proposals for zoning ordinances to make panhandling illegal. One proposal would make panhandling illegal in certain parts of the city. Another proposal would make panhandling illegal in the entire county. The advocates of the regulations believe they would make the city safer and more attractive to visitors and new residents.

Some citizen groups oppose the anti-panhandling campaigns. They argue that panhandlers are needy and should have the right to solicit money directly from the public. They say that not all panhandlers are drug addicts or are planning to use the money for illicit activities. They contend that many panhandle only out of necessity, and the money is most often used for food or survival needs. One 2011 survey of the homeless showed that 9 percent had drug or alcohol issues, 27 percent had a record of a mental illness, 26 percent had a physical disability, 9 percent had experienced domestic violence (past or present), 14 percent were on parole or probation, and 4 percent had some type of a developmental disability.

Others are skeptical of the proposed zoning ordinances. Regulations may help to reduce the homeless population in one city, but these skeptics argue that new laws would only move the problem to other locations. People in the small towns of surrounding rural areas argue that if larger towns and cities outlaw panhandling, then transients and indigent people probably will simply move to towns that have even fewer resources to deal with them.

In some small towns, transients have already taken over city parks and empty lots, creating excessive trash, unsanitary living conditions, and rising crime rates. “We do not have the medical resources, shelters, or law enforcement,” states a rural official outside of Redding, “to be able to handle increased numbers of transients. Our resources are inadequate now, and this type of demand would cause huge problems for our community.”

Opponents of new laws and regulations argue that such measures do not address the root of the problem. They advocate for more public funding for counseling services and assistance. They also argue that helping the poor to find job training would be the single most effective strategy in reducing poverty, even though this would be expensive.

Some groups of homeless people themselves have organized campaigns, claiming they have a legal right to panhandle on public property such as street corners and sidewalks. They also argue that they have a right to camp on public property. Many have said that they will not comply with laws if passed.

In spite of the opposition, the supporters of the Handouts Don't Help campaign plan to continue to promote their anti-panhandling goals and seek a solution through informing the public. They acknowledge, however, that legislation may be necessary to resolve this issue.