



Wheels To Work – A Proposal

3/21/17 – DRAFT

Issue:

- Panhandling activity in Springfield seems to have markedly increased recently. We do not know for certain the cause, but it could be a combination of one or more of the following elements:
 - Increasing levels of poverty have placed individuals and families at risk.
 - Recent federal court rulings have ensured panhandling can occur in most public locations as a “free speech” issue.
 - Springfield is considered a “giving community with a big heart” and may be attracting “professional panhandlers.”
 - Milder-than-normal weather.
- The City has received an increased number of complaints/concerns about panhandling within our community. Complaints/Concerns expressed center around the following:
 - Perception of increased panhandling in our community and the impact on our community’s reputation.
 - Safety concerns when panhandling occurs in or near traffic, including at locations where vehicles are moving at high speeds.
 - Concerns that panhandlers have no other options for, or access to, services (shelter, food, employment, etc).
 - Inability of sympathetic citizens or visitors to ascertain whether the person panhandling has a verifiable need.

In response to these observations and concerns received from citizens, as well as requests from Mayor Pro Tem Ken McClure and Councilwoman Phyllis Ferguson, the City of Springfield is working with a variety of partners to implement a new program – **Wheels To Work**. Elements of this program are based, in concept, on a similar program ([“There’s a Better Way”](#)) that was developed and implemented in Albuquerque, New Mexico, but has been customized to our unique, local circumstances.

Goals:

- Treat panhandlers with respect and compassion.
- Provide the dignity of work for those in need via both short-term work and long-term employment, including avenues toward better-paying jobs for those who exhibit a willingness to work, pass a drug test and background check, and possess job skills that match available jobs in our community.
- Connect those in need with service providers who can help them.
- Educate our citizens and visitors that there is a more effective way to help those in need than handing cash out of a car window.
- Reduce/End the need for panhandling in our community.

Proposal:

Wheels To Work is a three-pronged strategy designed to (a) offer dignity-promoting daily work opportunities to individuals currently panhandling within our community (to be referred to as “program guests,”) (b) learn more about our panhandling community and their needs, and (c) educate our community about the most effective giving opportunities that provide the greatest benefit to those in need.

A two-month pilot project is proposed, based upon the following timeline:

- During the first two weeks, email updates will be provided to partner organizations as appropriate or when modifications in the plan are needed.
- At any point during this pilot project, once the process is established and working well, the partner organizations may elect to expand the program to Safe to Sleep, known homeless camps, and other specific locations where the Wheels To Work buses or alternate transportation can serve those seeking work.
- After two months, representatives from the partner organizations will re-convene to assess:
 - the effectiveness of the pilot project,
 - the level of participation (“program guests” and partner organizations) in the pilot project, and
 - whether to (a) extend the pilot project, (b) convert the pilot project into a more permanent form, or (c) terminate the pilot project.

Component A: Learn more about our panhandling community and their needs

There is a lot we don’t know about our local panhandling community. In order to best address the needs of this community, we need to know more about what their needs are and whether they would welcome assistance.

This component of the program will consist of Crosslines/Council of Churches volunteers and other partners traveling to known panhandling locations to perform a series of interviews with panhandlers to collect information. Some information has already been collected by Crosslines/Council of Churches, Community Partnership of the Ozarks, and homeless advocates.

The data gathered will help determine the level of interest in continuing/expanding the pilot program, as well as additional services that can help address the needs of “program guests.”

Component B: Offer Dignity-Promoting Daily Work Opportunities

This component of the program will provide daily work opportunities to those individuals currently panhandling. Once this program is working effectively, the partners may elect to extend this offer to others in need within our community who are interested in working and are employable.

Various employment agencies can be used, but many jobs require applicants to pass a drug test and a background check. Those “program guests” willing to take a drug test and background check, and pass, will be eligible for significantly more employment opportunities than those who don’t.

The first stop will be the Missouri Job Center at 2900 E. Sunshine. At this location, the “program guests” will be greeted by a Workforce Specialist who will provide a quick assessment to determine whether the guest’s desire is for a more-immediate “day labor” job or long-term employment.

If the guest desires more immediate “day labor” work, they will be instructed as to the requirements and taken to People Ready for an assessment. If there is a need for work clothing, a resume, or other work-related needs, those needs will be addressed prior to the guest being taken to People Ready.

Those guests who are interested in long-term employment will be assigned to a customized workshop that will include comprehensive assessment to determine their specific needs, an appropriate referral, and an assignment of a case manager. Types of activities involved in the assessment will be an evaluation of job readiness (e.g., need assistance with basic services, obtaining a driver’s license or other documents, etc.) and/or a referral for other services (e.g., mental health services, housing services, etc.)

To offer transportation to the Missouri Job Center, two buses will be used. These buses will be branded with the name of the Wheels To Work program to offer potential “program guests” some level of confidence in the credibility of the offer being made to them. Both buses are former paratransit buses that are fully accessible to individuals in wheelchairs.

Once bus signage/branding is completed and drivers and other volunteers to help “staff” the bus have been identified and a schedule developed, the Wheels To Work buses will travel to known panhandling locations in the community and volunteers will extend offers to panhandlers to participate in this program. These locations are documented by Springfield police. Participation is, of course, voluntary. Volunteers on the buses will assist “program guests” by collecting information, providing information about services available, and offering food and other resources to meet immediate needs. Representatives from the Job Center will participate on the buses (as time allows) to

help identify individuals who might be a good fit for job vacancies available through the Job Center. As “program guests” are interviewed by case managers at the Job Center, we can determine which of these individuals qualify for transportation vouchers that can be used to get to and from employment.

The reason we are proposing this program be rolled out now, even though some program details are yet to be worked out, is because day-labor jobs increase at this time of year. The manager of People Ready has indicated that demand for day-labor services begins to increase in March of each year. He also indicates that transportation – getting to and from the job site – is a major hurdle for many workers. Thus, we are proposing to implement this pilot program as soon as possible, while working to overcome this transportation barrier.

Once “program guests” have worked with a case manager at the Job Center, the individual will be matched up with potential work based on their job skills and their willingness to take and pass a drug test and background check. People Ready has a small number of jobs available that do not require a drug test and background check.

This portion of the program will require the following resources:

- Drivers for the two buses
- Volunteers to ride on the buses and assist the program participants
 - Collect information
 - Provide information
 - Offer food and/or other supplies to meet their immediate needs
 - Assess healthcare needs
- Temporary magnetic signage for the buses to clearly brand/identify the vehicle as the official Wheels To Work transport vehicles. These magnets will only be needed until the buses are wrapped with graphics (if the pilot program becomes more permanent). “Program guests” will likely have a low trust level with all institutions and may be hesitant to get into a vehicle that is not clearly branded with the program name.
- Flyers and brochures providing information about the program and other services available to program guests.
- Food and other items to meet the immediate health needs of program guests. (We will reach out to partner organizations to assist with meeting these needs.)
- Information cards about the program that concerned citizens can hand out to panhandlers. The cards will provide information on services available, contact phone/address, hours of operation, etc.
 - We will make these accessible throughout the City at strategic locations, such as libraries, City and partner facilities
- Information collection forms for bus drivers and/or volunteers to track:
 - Number of people approached at each location
 - Number of people who accepted the offer to participate in the program
 - Indication as to whether each guest was willing to undergo a drug test and background check
 - Specific needs of each individual (e.g., healthcare, housing, etc)

C. Educate Our Community About the Most Effective Ways to Help

Sympathetic citizens (Springfield residents and visitors) handing cash out the window of vehicles to panhandlers is an inefficient and potentially dangerous model.

Inefficient: Citizens may not realize that their generous offer of cash could have a larger overall impact if those same dollars were contributed in a different manner. For example, if a sympathetic citizen hands a \$10 bill to a panhandler and the panhandler elects to use that cash for food, it will likely feed one person. If, however, that same \$10 was donated to Ozarks Food Harvest, that \$10 is leveraged to buy \$100 worth of food and could feed multiple people.

Potentially Dangerous: When well-meaning citizens hold cash out of a vehicle window, panhandlers often walk into the traffic to retrieve it, sometimes crossing multiple lanes of traffic. Panhandlers sometimes get caught in the traffic lanes when the light turns green and vehicles begin to move, creating a dangerous situation for the panhandler.

The action of a sympathetic citizen or visitor handing money to a panhandler is typically an impulse action that occurs based upon an emotional response at the time the citizen or visitor is faced with the panhandling situation. Panhandling can create an awkward, uncomfortable situation for both participants. For those able and interested in giving to address the core challenges faced by panhandlers and others in our community experiencing poverty, we must create a way for them to give in a convenient, safe manner shortly after the impulse strikes them. We do not want citizens or visitors making phone calls or texting while driving, so the message must be simple and “sticky” enough for them to pursue once they have completed their driving route.

United Way has volunteered to serve as the “donation collection” agency for this project. Donated funds will be dispersed to cover the costs to implement the Wheels To Work program.

Springfield is a very philanthropic community. Educating citizens and visitors about the return on investment (ROI) of a more strategic investment in a manner that is both informative and compassionate will be the key. Thus, this element of the strategy will consist of the following:

- Messaging
 - If you want to help, there is a better way. Instructions as to how to donate via a text or phone call. Do not text and drive. Do not call and drive.
 - Every panhandler has been offered transportation to apply for a day job.
- Social media educational campaign
- Traditional media educational campaign
- Post informational signs at the following locations frequented by panhandlers
 - 1. Kansas and I44
 - 2. Glenstone and Kearney

- 3. Glenstone and Division
- 4. Kansas and Kearney
- 5. Kearney and 65
- 6. James River/Glenstone
- 7. James River/National
- 8. Republic/Campbell
- 9. James River/Campbell
- 10. Sunshine/Campbell
- 11. Battlefield/Campbell
- 12. Battlefield/65

This portion of the program will require the following resources:

- Approval by City Council (if City funds are to be used)?
- United Way of the Ozarks will collect and distribute donated funds via their 211 service
- Branding of the Wheels To Work program – PIO
- Messaging for signs – two signs per location
 - We must obtain permission from MoDOT to post signs on their roadways (this is in process)
 - One sign at each location targeting driver/donor
 - 1) “Need Help with Food or Shelter? Call 211”
 - One sign at each location targeting those in need
 - 1) “Want to Help Panhandlers? Call 211”
- Signs for locations – Public Works (once branding and sign message text have been determined, if MoDOT approves)
- Social media presence
- Collection of data
- Communications back to community at selected milestones to indicate whether the program is working and significance of the impact
- Communication plan to determine how best to communicate the program and its legitimacy to the panhandler community
 - Homeless advocacy groups
 - One Door
 - Safe to Sleep
 - Salvation Army
 - Veteran’s Coming Home Center
 - Gathering Tree
 - Gathering Friends
- PSAs to offer to TV stations and radio stations