

# **“Hope Bags” - Pros and Cons (2005)**

## **IS THERE A NEED?**

- Many of the Houston area’s 10,000 to 20,000 homeless regularly panhandle along commuter routes far away from established homeless shelters inside the Loop. They live in the suburbs for the same reason many of us do; it’s safer!
- Many panhandlers are as their signs say “hungry” and they may be unaware of how or where to get help. **This program targets the “invisible” homeless who by virtue of their geographic location or lack of knowledge, fail to find their way downtown to current facilities.**
- Many commuters want to help panhandlers but are confused, scared or jaded by the myths about the homeless. **This program emphasizes education and teaches people “how” to help.**
- Past efforts to bring food to the homeless have been hampered by the high costs of transportation, food spoilage and overhead. It can be difficult to find the needy. Panhandlers and commuters interact constantly and the cost to distribute is zero.
- Any church, individual, or organization can become a “meal provider” by making and distributing Hope Bags to the homeless. Although the food provided is not hot, **it is a low cost alternative to opening a soup kitchen.**

## **IS IT GOOD FOR THE HOMELESS?**

- The program provides a complete meal that can be eaten immediately or saved for later. Even if the recipient doesn’t want food, someone will eat it eventually.
- Food as a gift cannot be easily converted into cash to purchase drugs or alcohol. **Hope Bags may not help drug-abusers with their addictions but it certainly will not promote it.**
- **Hope Bags contain complete instructions, maps and telephone numbers to existing services** where the homeless can obtain longer-term help and counseling. The maps are easily reproduced in quantity and were designed to be folded into a pocket-size package.
- The personalized letters included in each bag help to humanize each recipient and promote hope. **Return postcards allow the disenfranchised to reconnect with society and spirituality through non-denominational prayer requests.** Above all it allows the homeless to “see” how much we care as individuals and as a community.

## **IS IT GOOD FOR THE COMMUNITY?**

- **The program fulfills a need within the community** to help but without being overly complicated, time consuming or expensive. All a commuter has to do is carry a Hope Bag in the front seat of the car and hand it to a panhandler. Churches, which keep several Hope Bags at their reception desk, can deal effectively with walk-in “emergency” solicitations.
- **The community receives a dramatically expanded awareness** and participation in the homeless problem. Teens and youth are able to share their unconditional love and optimism, commuters and adults are able to all participate as part of the community solution, and feedback in the form of returned postcards will connect the community to the names and prayer requests of many of the less fortunate.
- The program can be easily adapted for churches, schools, youth groups or other organizations and is already being implemented by over 131 groups across the United States.

## **WHAT IS THE TIME AND COST INVOLVED?**

- **It costs about \$3.00 to \$3.50 to construct each Hope Bag.** Nearly 100% of all funds go to the purchase of food. **Distribution is free.** The only other costs are postage and office supplies.
- Other than initial setup, the time involved in the program is evenly distributed throughout the community. The youth must write notes, the literature must be copied, the food must be purchased, and the bags must be constructed and distributed to the community.