

Building Your Community

Homelessness and Housing

The need: Homelessness is more common, more hidden, and more varied than the picture most people carry in their heads. Behind it are ordinary people, including families and kids, who hit a run of hard luck, and youth can help in real, respectful ways.

"No one is useless in this world who lightens the burdens of another." — Charles Dickens

"I've learned that people will forget what you said and forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." — Maya Angelou

"Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals." — Pema Chödrön

FACILITATOR NOTES

Time. about 60–90 minutes, run in one sitting. Works in a classroom, youth group, or club. Option A needs no setup; Options B and C use real service arranged ahead of time.

Service today. Pick one option in Serve below and set it up before you begin.

Warm-up (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

Keep this quick, short answers are great. Read the questions together.

- When you picture someone who's homeless, who do you see? Where did that picture come from?
- What's the difference between a house and a home?
- Beyond the obvious, what do you think would be the hardest part of not having a stable place to live?
- Why do you think people sometimes look away from someone who's homeless?

Learn (10–20 minutes)

When people hear "homeless," they usually picture one thing: a person on a downtown sidewalk. But that's a small slice of it. Homelessness simply means not having a stable, permanent place to live, and it looks like many things. It's a family staying in a motel or doubled up with relatives after losing their apartment. It's a classmate whose family is between homes. It's someone sleeping in a car, couch-surfing, or staying in a shelter while they get back on their feet. Many people experiencing homelessness have jobs. Many are kids. It's almost always a situation someone is in, not who they are.

It can look like:

- A family doubled up with relatives or living in a motel after losing housing.
- A student who's couch-surfing or staying in a shelter, still showing up to school.
- Someone living in their car while holding down a job.

A closer look. Picture a family of three. A year ago they were fine: two incomes, a small apartment. Then one parent got hurt and couldn't work, the medical bills piled up, and a few missed rent payments later they lost the place. Right now they're sharing a relative's living room. The kids still go to school, the parents still job-hunt, and from the outside you'd never know. They don't need pity. They need a little

help and some dignity while they climb back: a bag of groceries, warm coats, someone who treats them like the regular family they are.

Why it happens. There's no single road into homelessness, and it's rarely one bad choice. Far more often it's a chain of hard breaks with no safety net to catch them: a job lost, a serious illness or injury, a family falling apart, bills that outran a paycheck. Many people are one or two unlucky events away from it and don't realize how close. Understanding that keeps us humble and kind. The goal isn't to figure out how someone got here; it's to help them, and to remember it could be far more of us than we'd like to think.

How youth can help. The safest and most useful way for youth to help is through the shelters and programs already set up for this, and by meeting real, tangible needs. Youth can:

- Put together kits of basics that shelters hand out: socks, hygiene items, warm hats and gloves, snacks.
- Help at a shelter or meal program with sorting, packing, serving, or organizing donations.
- Run a focused drive for the specific items a local shelter says it needs most.
- Treat people experiencing homelessness with the respect you'd want: a kind word, eye contact, no staring or judging.

Keep these in mind.

- **A situation, not an identity.** Say “a person experiencing homelessness,” not “a homeless person.” The words shape how we see people.
- **Dignity over pity.** Help as an equal who cares, not as a rescuer looking down. Nobody wants to be someone's charity project.
- **Ask what's actually needed.** Shelters know far better than we do; the right socks beat a pile of random donations.
- **It could be anyone.** Remember how thin the line is. That keeps your help humble and human.

Serve (30–60 minutes)

Today you'll put this into practice in a real service activity. Here are ways to do it:

Option A — Gather what you already have *(no cost, no prep, works in any setting)*

Without spending a dollar, collect warm, useful things your group already owns but doesn't use, clean coats, blankets, hats, gloves, unopened hygiene items, and donate them to a local shelter. Bundle them neatly so they're ready to hand out. Giving from what you already have meets a real need and asks nothing but a look through your closet.

Option B — Put together dignity bags *(low cost, a bit more effort)*

As a group, make small “dignity bags” a shelter can hand out, focused on personal care and comfort: travel-size hygiene items, socks, lip balm, a comb, tissues, a granola bar. Keep them simple and respectful. Check with a local shelter on what to include and how they would like them packed, since they know what helps most.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll check ahead of time with a local shelter on what to include in the dignity bags and how they'd like them packed, and gather the supplies (donated or from a small budget).

Option C — Partner with a shelter or run a drive *(more effort; ongoing service)*

Build an ongoing connection with a local or national nonprofit that serves people experiencing homelessness, a shelter, a housing program, or a rescue mission, and help on a schedule with meals, sorting, or organizing, or run a focused drive for the exact items they're short on. Showing up again and again is worth far more than a single visit.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll connect ahead of time with a local or national nonprofit that serves people experiencing homelessness and set up how the group can help. JustServe.org can help you find one and make the connection.

Before you go (all options): Help through organizations, not by approaching people on the street; youth should never walk up to or hand things directly to someone living outside on their own. Go as a group with your mentor or a trusted adult, work in public, supervised settings, and follow the shelter's or program's rules. Let the adults handle any direct contact.

Reflect (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

After serving, talk through a few of these together, then give everyone quiet time to write.

Did anything you learned change the picture you had of who experiences homelessness?

Why do dignity and respectful words matter so much with this need?

What's the difference between helping someone as an equal and helping out of pity?

What surprised you about how close many people are to losing stable housing?

Then finish one or both sentences:

One way I want to help people without stable housing is...

One thing I'll change in how I see or talk about homelessness is...
