How to help someone experiencing homelessness

A plain guide for churches in Great Falls, Montana.

Treat the person as a neighbor, not a project. You do not have to fix everything. A kind word, a meal, and a clear next step can be enough.

Dignity first

- Ask their name, and use it.
- Talk with them, not about them. Don’t share their story without permission, and don’t take photos or post about them.
- Don’t assume you know what they need. Ask.
- Don’t pressure anyone to pray, attend church, or share their story in exchange for help.

Do

- Start with a simple hello and your name.
- Listen more than you talk.
- Offer a specific help you can actually give right now: a meal, a warm layer, a bus pass, or a ride to a shelter — if you can do it safely.
- If they want more help, walk through gfhelp.org together, or call 211 (or 406-268-1337) with them.
- In cold weather, treat this as urgent. See the box below.
- If someone is in danger or talking about suicide, call 911 or 988. Veterans can dial 988, then press 1.

Don’t

- Don’t make promises you can’t keep — a bed, a job, rent money, or “we’ll take care of everything.”
- Don’t argue about why they are in this situation.
- Don’t try to handle a medical or mental-health emergency yourself. Call 911 or 988.
- Don’t give a stranger a ride if you feel unsafe. Go in pairs when you can, or call a shelter or 211 with them instead.

Cash, and what to give instead

Cash can help, but it can also put someone at risk or be used in ways you didn’t intend. If your church has a policy, follow it. Often more useful: a hot meal, water, socks, gloves, a hat, a blanket, a bus pass, or going with them to a meal or a shelter.

For groceries, do not send people to the Community Food Bank door and expect a box. They need a voucher from Opportunities, Inc. first. See the contacts handout. For clothing and household goods, Emilie Center needs a voucher from a partner such as a church, Opportunities, Inc., Salvation Army, or the Rescue Mission.

Safety

- Meet in a public place when you can, and tell someone where you are going.
- Go with another person from church when you can.
- Keep your own limits. You are not a shelter, a clinic, or the police. If you feel unsafe, leave and call 911.

Cold weather in Great Falls

When it feels like 32 degrees or colder, the Rescue Mission is open all night, 10 PM to 7 AM. Call 406-761-0095. This is true no matter the person’s situation.

After 10 PM, call the Men’s Shelter at 406-761-0095.

Men’s Shelter: 326 2nd Ave S, 406-761-0095. Women’s Shelter: 317 2nd Ave S, 406-452-1483. Families / Cameron Family Center: 408 2nd Ave S, 406-761-2145.

Free lunch is at 12:15 PM and dinner at 6:15 PM every day at the Rescue Mission. Call to confirm times.

Hypothermia and frostbite can happen quickly. If someone is outside in the cold and seems confused, sleepy, or is shivering hard, call 911.

If you are not sure what to do

Go to gfhelp.org and answer three short questions together. Or call 211. Hours change, so please call ahead.