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CITY OF MANCHESTER

Police Department

June 7, 2017

Community Members
City of Manchester, NH

Re: Panhandling – A Community Issue

Let me begin by saying that not every challenge is easily resolved. When it comes to panhandling in our city this sentiment holds true. A good police department is responsive to the needs of the community it serves, and all of us in uniform are judged by our success and failure in responding to our community's needs - we understand that. As Chief of Police I must balance the concerns of different groups equally and that sometimes means working to serve the rights of the minority over the majority. My guide as Chief is the core values set forth by constitutionally protected freedoms and liberties. I must apply this to the number one complaint I receive from the Manchester community which is panhandling and begging.

With increasing intensity, people are asking why the police are not doing anything about the proliferation of panhandling and begging in Manchester. To be fair, it's inaccurate to say that the Manchester Police Department (MPD) has done nothing; police take enforcement action when the behavior of a panhandler, or a motorist, violates an ordinance or law. The MPD has taken action by summoning panhandlers who endanger themselves and the motoring public when they dart out into traffic to take money from a motorist. The MPD has summonsed motorists who stop at green lights to hand the panhandlers money, something that is clearly dangerous to the other motorists, as well as the panhandler. We've taken these enforcement actions to the chagrin of the ACLU whose representatives work to protect the rights of citizens who chose to panhandle. I support their work in protecting freedom but that must be balanced against basic public safety.

To those who are frustrated with law enforcement regarding panhandling and begging within the city it is critical to realize that other factors such as homelessness, poverty, a mental health condition or addiction fuel many to panhandle. The aforementioned social conditions do not make a person a criminal, yet it increasingly seems that the expectation of the public is to treat them as criminals, by rooting out panhandlers from any given street or sidewalk. Absent criminal behavior, many feel we should treat these citizens as criminals, when they are not. I humbly believe we can do better as a community in figuring out solutions to this challenge.

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A NATIONALLY ACCREDITED LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCY



I do not think panhandling is just a law enforcement issue. If the panhandling involves an underlying criminal offense, such as threatening or aggressively panhandling in which another is in fear due to the manner in which the begging occurs, that is a law enforcement issue. Resolving the issue and complaints about panhandling will require a community solution and the MPD is a ready partner in helping to address the concerns of the community. On a practical level, the first step would be to urge the public to stop giving money to panhandlers, and perhaps consider focusing funds on the many social services that are truly helping people in need. Once the panhandlers are given money there is no controlling how they will spend it, but investing your money in charitable services would provide a better avenue for their help and recovery.

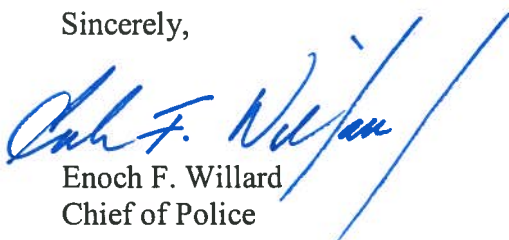
I fully understand that those who give to panhandlers do so from a place of generosity, but I ask you to consider what is the reality of the person that is left in the wake of this kindness? Do these donors ever question whether or not that money will be used to buy drugs, perhaps even a fatal dose of heroin/fentanyl? Do they wonder if the panhandler will use it to buy alcohol and potentially pass out to never wake again? Do they realize they may actually be contributing to, or even encouraging, the panhandler's social challenges?

According to MPD records between 2015 to June 1, 2017 twenty-four (24) people that have been involved in panhandling have overdosed, requiring medical intervention, some of whom have overdosed multiple times. Six (6) of the twenty-four (24) died from their overdose. These numbers reflect the truth behind many, but certainly not all, panhandlers in the City of Manchester. These individuals are suffering from the disease of addiction and need intervention and treatment service in hopes of long-term recovery. What the panhandlers do not need is money to be handed to them to facilitate their addiction. This simple act of kindness could very well lead to their overdose or even death.

If those in our community who routinely give to panhandlers really understood the underlying social challenges behind panhandling, I honestly believe they would recognize their donation would be better utilized by the social agencies that can address the panhandlers issues. Homelessness, mental illness and addiction can be addressed by our social service network to put people back on track. As a community we need to look inward and extol our generosity in a more productive and humane manner. Next time, before you give, ask yourself, can your donation to a panhandler be better spent giving to a food pantry, a recovery center, or any of the many agencies that seek to give a hand up and not just a hand out? The answer is yes, it may even save a life.

The Manchester Police Department fully understands the concerns of the community when it comes to panhandling in the city. The challenge ahead of us is to balance constitutional protections against the greater good of our community and public opinion. This is a delicate balance and I am confident that if we first seek to understand and raise awareness on the complexity of the issue, across the spectrum, and change our behaviors, we will effectively put an end to this practice in our city. In this process we will help those that truly need it, the right way, through the organizations with the necessary resources to address their needs.

Sincerely,



Enoch F. Willard
Chief of Police