Prompt Two

You have 60 minutes to respond to the following prompt. Allow yourself time to read and annotate the passage and to organize your ideas.

This prompt includes an excerpted article by Allen Alston published in Crosscut on September 20, 2018 addressing the problem of homelessness and his decision to give money to the homeless. Based on the reading, your study on the subject, and/or your own experiences, write a cogent argument for or against giving money directly to homeless individuals. Remember, as well, that all quotations need to be properly acknowledged, or you will commit plagiarism. This should be a fully-developed essay with purposeful paragraphing. Finally, leave yourself enough time to proof-read; typographical errors will be treated as misspellings. Be sure you also consider and respond to possible objections to your argument.

Why I Started Giving to the Homeless

By Allen Alston
Published in Crosscut September 20, 2018

The debate about homelessness goes on and on, but it skips over the individual sitting on the sidewalk. Imagine yourself homeless after a night outside on the street, sleeping in a doorway, in a tent or a ramshackle vehicle. You wake up with no money and nowhere to go. People in this circumstance are right here in front of us, in our neighborhoods and where we work. It is a matter of choosing to see them or not.

Every morning, my bus passes people sleeping on the sidewalks, some in tents, others on cardboard or curled up in doorways. I see them standing in line and milling about in front of the Downtown Service Center and the Union Gospel Mission. It has been heartbreaking to witness.

Several weeks ago I got off my bus and saw a young man sitting on a bench with a backpack at his feet, looking glum and staring off into the distance. I had some extra cash so I walked up and asked him if I could help out. He looked up and I handed him a $20 bill. His face lit up. It changed his morning and changed the way I think about giving.

I now advocate giving help in the here and now. Put money directly into a person’s hand. No strings attached, no expectation that it will be spent in the “right way”. A person living on the street shouldn’t have to beg and hold out their hand or wait in a long line for a meal.

Pick a person that looks in need of help and perform a random act of kindness. I cannot change someone’s circumstances, but I can give them a better moment.

I have talked about giving cash with friends and acquaintances and posted my thoughts about direct giving on our neighborhood blog, Next Door. I was amazed at the varying reactions. The overwhelming sentiment was to never give money directly to a homeless person; that giving cash might somehow encourage them to stay in the neighborhood or that they might use it to buy alcohol or drugs. The underlying sentiment was that they should get their assistance from a food bank or a social service agency. I was told that it was the Union Gospel Mission’s official policy to not to give money directly; lots of social service agencies, and even some cities, agree. While many people believe only in giving to
agencies providing services, however, journalist Bryce Covert has that some research, particularly abroad, suggests that recipients of direct cash help benefit significantly.

A common theme that has struck me as particularly sad is the belief that the majority of the homeless were drunks, drug addicts, criminals or thieves. It is true that the category “homeless” has come to include all of those people, but there are so many, many more who are none of those things. Homeless is a catch-all term with too many bad connotations. It is a description of a condition, not an individual. The sins of a few laid upon the many. I would argue that the majority are unemployed, displaced and depressed. Down on their luck.

And then there’s the idea that they should just get a job. But how do you get a job with no clean clothes or an address to put on an application? Even if you were able to find a cheap apartment, you need first and last month’s rent and a security deposit. What’s that, $3,000 for a cheap place? Where are you going to get that kind of money working for minimum wage? It is a catch-22.

What to do about homelessness is a hell of a mess that our government has been trying to solve for years with no good solution in sight. In the meantime, my premise is simple: Those of us who have much need to help those without.

We can donate to charities, food banks or homeless shelters, or by giving food, clothing, tents, or sleeping bags directly to individuals. I advocate putting at least some of the money directly into the hand of a homeless man or woman. Give them a better moment.

Austin Lyles’ Response (Score 6 out of 6)

Allen Alston’s wrote an article for Crosscut about why he began giving money to the homeless. Homeless people should not be given money directly. Although this is a message that may sound too harsh or rude to some, it is a statement that suggests there are better things for us to do to help the homeless. The stereotype of homeless people taking money given to them and using the money for things such as drugs or alcohol was started for a reason; there is no smoke without a fire, so to speak. It is true that there are many homeless that genuinely do use money given to them for good, yet there is a better way to help those who want the help and will show it by using what they are given properly. Helping out the homeless in the most efficient way possible is simply donations to local homeless shelters and soup kitchens. Alston’s article from Crosscut is focused on primarily why he began giving money directly to the homeless. However this is a mistake and inefficient in tackling the problem of a large homeless population as highlighted by Alston, himself.

There is a large population of homeless people today and that unfortunately seems to not be changing anytime within the near future. These individuals without homes need shelter, food, and water. Alston suggests that there should be some money that is given, “directly into the hand of a homeless man or woman,” to give homeless people a “better moment”. However, when donating to a shelter, the items that are given are guaranteed to go to good use and will last homeless individuals more than a single, better moment. As Alston explains, things like, “food, clothing, tents, or sleeping bags,” are essentials that would help any individual in need, for certain. However, giving these items directly to the homeless may prove fruitless, as some may already have a place to stay or they may even use the items as bartering on their own between their fellow homeless peers. This is to say that giving items that are unnecessary may not help the homeless, as it is difficult to ascertain what an individual may truly need even if people would ask the homeless individuals directly. Shelters are often full of homeless individuals that are seeking help and want to work hard to regain what they may have once had or even earn something that they did not have before. The individuals that enter shelters can only really stay so long as they stick to the rules set by the shelter they are living in. This provides a structure for the homeless to hold on to as they try to
begin working again. Also, shelters can even learn from the homeless they take in about other homeless individuals that are out on the street and need a place to go. This process ensures that not only the homeless within the shelter are being taken care of, but also they can find those who still need help. With donations for the shelter, those who live in the shelter will have the materials needed to live and will receive what they truly need.

Donating money to organizations that help the homeless is an excellent idea, as that money can be used how the homeless may need. Some people cannot afford to donate often and especially cannot afford to regularly give homeless people money. It is true that a large portion of the modern population is in a great position to provide the homeless with money directly, yet there are still many who can barely afford their current households and are on the verge of joining the homeless population. Many investments are required by today's standard of living in a decent home that provides great shelter. Surely donating a little amount of one's overall earnings is feasible, but may not be used for the betterment of the homeless individual. In the same way that there are no guarantees that an individual will irresponsibly use the money given to them, there is as much proof that the individual will use the money for something that is truly useful for the individual's future. Besides, working at shelters or soup kitchens is a great way to help without donating currency.

Donating money or items may be out of reach and some people may not be capable of donating any material item with their current position. However, individuals can still donate their time in order to help the homeless. There are already many shelters and kitchens for the homeless that need volunteers. In terms of ensuring that efforts are not wasted, doing the work yourself is an excellent way to ensure that your efforts to assist the homeless are not a waste. Many shelters and kitchens seem to have low amounts of volunteers and are always looking for all the help they can receive. Finding locations to make food or organize donations is a great help to organizations that help the homeless directly. There is no better way than having the individual do the work if that individual wants to help.

Although Alston does have a good point that it really can make someone's day by providing a direct donation to homeless individuals, there are too many unknowns for this to be a realistic method of assisting the homeless, even for the brightest of optimists. Should people truly want to help the homeless, they should work hard to maintain the shelters we have open currently through donating or volunteering to these locations. The sentiment is subjective and there is a lesser chance of people being grateful to individuals without seeing the donators' faces directly. However, it is not the pride obtained from donating to individuals directly that should fuel helping those in need, it is indeed the thought as to why the donations are made that counts. Alston has several excellent points, but there are consequences for every action.