

On a mission

Stuart Harper left a career in business to help the needy — one bite at a time

Premium content from **Business First** - by Gary Burns

Date: Friday, June 3, 2011, 6:00am EDT

Warm breezes embrace pedestrians on the streets of downtown Buffalo, at last. But for some who commute from the leafy suburbs, that news isn't altogether good. They can be heard to comment that the fine weather also means that the season of beggars and bums has arrived. Like leeches, some say, these people of the streets will try to latch onto you, asking for money, offering a thousand lies.

"I need it for bus fare."

"I got to take my sister to the hospital."

"I just need to buy a sandwich."

In light of this, [Buffalo Place Inc.](#) ("We're Downtown") issued a caution to you and I, those of us with money in our pockets: "Say 'No' to Panhandling."

Panhandlers, according to Buffalo Place, are "most often homeless or transients (who) visually detract from the area and project a negative image." And so, "Do not let the downtown area become a comfortable environment for panhandlers. If we all make an extra effort to say "NO" to the panhandlers, together we can decrease, if not eliminate panhandling."

What's to be done?

"I couldn't agree more," said **Stuart Harper**, executive director of the [Buffalo City Mission](#), responding to the Buffalo Place campaign. Don't give panhandlers any money, he said, because it will usually go to feed an addiction, not an empty stomach.

"We offer breakfast, lunch and dinner every day at the Mission, free of charge, to anyone who comes to our door," Harper said. "If a panhandler approaches you, you can tell them to go to the City Mission for a free meal ... We feed everyone who comes to us, as long as they are not violent."

That's true, but not all of us well-fed, well-groomed suburbanites are comfortable interacting with panhandlers in any way. In that case, firmly say, "No, thank you," and just keep walking, Harper said. "Do not make eye contact and do not stop walking. If you find yourself alone, walk toward areas where you know people gather, like a train stop, or walk into an open building."

Harper, 60, came to his present job after a long career as a senior manager in corporate sales and marketing. Some years ago, he and his wife, Laura – who was also a successful businessperson and now is hospice director at [Buffalo General Hospital](#) – left the business world to "refocus" on service to others. (Both are deeply committed Christians.)



Stuart Harper is executive director of the Buffalo City Mission.

Jim Courtney

There's also this: Harper himself is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict – 22 years sober. When he speaks about what people suffer through when they've hit bottom, he knows what he's talking about.

A Buffalo City Mission primer

Harper oversees operations at the City Mission's two major facilities: the Men's Community Center at 100 E. Tupper St. and Cornerstone Manor Women and Children's Shelter at the corner of North and Michigan streets.

The men's center offers nightly shelter and refuge to as many as 200 of the homeless. A yearlong residential program also provides men the chance to learn how to be self-sufficient before returning to the world outside. When Harper took over several years ago, there were three men in the long-term program; today there are 53.

Cornerstone provides emergency shelter for up to 16 single women and five families seeking protection from the dangers of the street or from abusive relationships. A two-year residential program there offers up to 12 families and 46 single women life lessons to help them live successfully on their own.

"We were full at Cornerstone Manor after we'd been open less than a month," Harper said. "The family units, which are women with children, were full after about three days. I could build a facility there four times the size of what we have for families and it would be full. Domestic violence is the big issue. About 50 percent of our women come to us as a direct result of domestic violence. And a lot of it is precipitated by drug use, either by our clients or their mates or both."

The City Mission's budget is roughly \$6.2 million a year. About 85 percent of that comes from individual donors, who number 33,000.

A quick scan of the Mission's Facebook pages reveals a wide and varied list of individuals and organizations who pitch in to help. There are University at Buffalo clothing donations. There's help from 97 Rock's DJ Jickster and crew and from the Patrick P. Lee Foundation. There's mention of Employee Benefit Concepts Inc and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Insurance is another benefactor, as is [Chiacchia & Fleming](#) LLP. And many area physicians and nurses give freely of their time at the Mission's health clinics.

About 3,700 people (and 480 churches) volunteer services during the course of a year, according to Harper.

"They volunteer either for a particular event once a year, or they come in every Thursday at lunch or every Monday at dinner. And then perhaps we'll have a church group that comes and does dinner every Wednesday night, for example," he said.

On Thanksgiving and Christmas mornings, about 500 volunteers show up to pack and distribute 3,500 meals out into the community.

"We also get grants for certain things," he said. "For example, we got a grant from the Department of Justice, through the city, then through the police department, to hire our first domestic violence counselor at Cornerstone."

Eating an elephant

Harper lifted his arms into the air, palms up, and looked out at the comings and goings at the men's center.

"Are we getting anywhere with this? Well, what's the old saying? How do you eat an elephant? ... One bite at a time.

"So the bite we're taking here is maybe a little different than the bite we took 10 or 15 years ago. We were really focused then on trying to provide basic services – food, shelter and clothing. We're still focused on that today; that's still one of our primary objectives. Whoever comes to our door, we at least try to provide that for them – food, shelter and clothing," he said.

"But we also want to do more. How do we stop the trend? How do we get these people beyond the position they're in now? How do we change their future? Is there some intervention that we can do to help them change their future, to take a different path?"

Which is where the long-term recovery programs come in – one year for the men, two years for the women. Residents in the programs fill their days with life-skills classes on budgeting, nutrition, decision-making, setting goals, anger management, addiction-relapse prevention and more.

Harper said the stock "picture of homelessness we have in the back of our minds, some old guy with long hair, lying in the gutter," doesn't fit most of the Mission's clients. The rotten economy and high rates of joblessness that go with it loom large in many bottomed-out lives.

"Drugs and addiction are a big reason that many of the men and women are with us," he said. "But I'll tell you, more than 50 percent of our residents today; it's their first time being homeless. And many of them, a year or two ago, had jobs and were living with their families. Because of an illness, they lost their jobs. Or they're divorced, or for any number of other reasons they're living with us, and they don't have an addiction at all. They're living with us because they don't have any savings or they've used them all up and they have no place to go."

Also, in the deadliest, coldest depths of winter, the Mission opens its "Code Blue" operation, Harper said.

"When the temperatures get very cold or there's a severe storm, we open the shelter to men and women who historically have a hard time living in a structured situation. There may be mental illness coupled with it. And so what we do is change our program a little bit for them, understanding what some of their concerns are, so that they come and go as they please. They really don't want to be in a restricted environment. We want to be able to house them, give them shelter if they want it, and give them some food.

"So we open up at 8 o'clock at night and we stay open until 8 a.m. And we provide soup and sandwiches through the whole time. We put cots in our day room and they can sleep there or they can come and go as they please. We do not commingle them with our other population. Many of them, if they get around too many people, they get anxious and react inappropriately."

Harper mentioned that mental illness is often part of the picture in the chronically homeless. He said the Mission has consequently partnered with other organizations in an effort to get appropriate help for people who come to the door.

"People come to us because we're well known, but sometimes we're not the appropriate facility for them. So we become like a referral service in the case of the mentally ill. And we want it to be what I refer to as a 'hard' referral. We don't just want to tell them to 'go there' because often they'll never get 'there,'" he said.

The Mission has developed partnerships and collaborations with personnel at agencies around the city so that “instead of it being the City Mission calling for assistance with a mental health case, it’s, for instance, ‘Paul calling Mary,’ because we’ve been working together and trust one another,” Harper said.

“This works because we learned that you cannot be all things to all people. When you try to do that, you end up being no good to anyone,” he adds.

The man has been there, and back

Harper and his wife have two young children. He has three adult children from a marriage that ended long ago.

“Today, I have the greatest job in the world,” he said. “Cocaine once brought me to my knees. I think I could have been an alcoholic for my entire life, but cocaine brought me to my knees in about six months. I lost everything. I lost my business. I lost my family. People sometimes tell me it’s not good to reveal this about myself. But no – it’s the secrets that we keep buried deep inside that end up hurting us.”

“Now,” he said, “to be able to give back and know exactly what many of these men and women are going through as they fight their addictions, to me it’s a blessing.”