

HOMELESS CHALLENGE PROJECT

Challenge the people and leaders of your community to take a Homeless Challenge (formerly called the urban plunge), a life-altering experience with the power to effect change. This program asks individuals from economically privileged backgrounds to give up every day things (i.e. cell phones, warm bed, and shelter), and live on the streets as a person experiencing homelessness. The experience typically lasts from 24-48 hours.

THE HOMELESS CHALLENGE

(<http://nationalhomeless.org/about-us/projects/homeless-challenge/>) serves as an educational tool providing awareness to those who participate. While a participant cannot experience homelessness entirely, when a bed and food awaits him at home, the Challenge does offer insight into the life of a person without a home – waiting in soup lines, walking great distances to access services, and feeling ‘invisible’ to those who are not homeless.

HOW TO BEGIN

- For a detailed manual about the Homeless Challenge, as coordinated by the National Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, DC, visit the NCH’s website or contact:

Speakers’ Bureau Coordinator

Phone: (202) 462-4822

Email: speakersbureau@nationalhomeless.org

The Homeless Challenge works best if coordinated with guides (either currently homeless or formerly homeless peoples) who can stay throughout the night with participants for security reasons. Make sure to recruit enough guides such that each guide stays with a maximum of five participants to avoid large crowds which might draw attention. In addition, a small ratio of guides to participants allows for participants to partake in genuine conversation with a person who is experiencing or has experienced homelessness, as well as share their day’s experiences with their guide and with the other participants. Remember to offer an honorarium to your guides – i.e. \$50 per guide, per night.

Contact local shelters for recommendations of potential guides and to notify staff of your plans. For contact information of local shelters or homeless coalitions, check out the Directories section on NCH’s website:

<http://nationalhomeless.org/references/directory/>

PERSONAL PREPARATION TIPS

- Dress in your worst clothes; they should be old/comfortable items you won't mind getting dirty.
- Bring along one piece of ID and your insurance card to bury in your sock
- Wear no jewelry or watches.
- Refrain from taking a shower for at least two days before beginning the challenge. No cologne, deodorant or use of scented soap. Rub unscented baby oil into your hair to make it look as though your hair hasn't been washed in some time. For men: don't shave for five days before starting the homeless challenge.
- Wear extra layers of clothes even if it is warm out. Homeless people wear extra clothes as they have no place to store clothes in the daytime and it keeps them warm at night.
- Wear roughed-up old shoes.
- Bring along a sheet of cardboard to use as a mattress. Or this will be one of the items you search for upon hitting the streets.
- Bring along an old blanket. Sleeping bags are okay, such as the flannel ones, but do not use state of the art down sleeping bags. A sheet of plastic or a black garbage bag will also be useful in case of rain or snow.
- Women are encouraged to bring along sanitary napkins, as shelters do not always have these items available for free.
- Bring along a pack of cigarettes, plus matches, to share with homeless people. Giving someone a cigarette is a good way to start a conversation. (NCH does not encourage the habit of smoking. Studies have shown that a majority of homeless adults do smoke cigarettes).

ACTIVITIES TO TAKE PART IN DURING YOUR HOMELESS CHALLENGE EXPERIENCE

- Talk with and listen to other homeless people
- Beg for money. Challenge participants are sometimes reluctant to do this. We're taught that nothing in life is free, that it's better not to ask people for anything. Panhandle rich and poor alike. You're likely to get a better response from the so called "working poor". Split up, but keep your partner in sight. Panhandle for at least two hours. Re-group to see who was the most successful and what techniques worked best. After completing the challenge, you may give the money that you collect to other homeless people you encounter on the streets or to your local host organization who will see that it gets to the unsheltered homeless.
- Sleep outside. Don't expect to get much sleep as the police or private security guards might chase you off.
- Do not stay in shelters, as you may be taking away a bed from someone who really needs it. Sleep outside, regardless of the weather, with the unsheltered homeless. However, hang out in, or in front of, shelters, day centers, etc. to get to know your fellow homeless people.
- Go into cafeterias and fast food restaurants to look for food scraps left on the tables. Eat the food and stay in the facility until the manager runs you out.
- Go to restaurants and ask if you could sweep the sidewalk for a free sandwich.
- Go into restaurants, hotels, and office buildings and ask if you could use the restroom.

- Eat at local meal programs. In most cities, finding food is a relatively easy endeavor; don't worry about eating food meant for homeless people, as there is plenty of food to be found while on the streets. Even if you are not hungry, go to the soup kitchens anyway. This will allow you to interact with other homeless people and familiarize yourself with the various food programs in the city.
- There is a minority of homeless organizations that have conditions for getting a meal or a bed for the night. Examples of such requirements are: getting counseling, taking life-skills classes, taking a breathalyzer test, paying a nightly fee, or attending a religious service. Find out which agencies have such requirements by either talking with other homeless people or checking out the agencies in your community.
- Find a highly visible place to sleep (e.g. park bench, heat/steam grate, bus stop bench). Go to these places late at night to guarantee you are not taking away someone's favorite spot. If this somehow happens, give up your spot and move somewhere else. Have your partner stay awake at all times. Do this in two-hour shifts.
- Go dumpster diving in search of food and recyclable materials. You might be shocked by the "abundance from the streets." Watch out for needles. Use a stick instead of your hands. If you must use your hands, borrow a pair of gloves.
- Apply for work at fast food restaurants. Tell them you live in a well known local shelter or live on the streets. Tell them that you don't have an address, but you are willing to come back daily to find out if there are any job openings.

CANDIDATE CHALLENGE

When planning a Homeless Challenge, extend the Challenge to political candidates, incumbents, and other public officials. Contact these local, state, and national political figures to offer them a chance to see how public policy directly affects the homeless and low-income people. In the end, this program might garner the necessary political will to end poverty and homelessness in the United States. Representative Jackie Speier of California and Californian gubernatorial candidate Neel Kashkari have both spent nights in their local homeless shelters.

FOR THE CANDIDATE HOMELESS CHALLENGE, POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES INCLUDE:

Homeless Challenge (Short Version): Same as the above, but anywhere from 8 to 24 hours. Participants can eat at local meal programs and panhandle. We suggest that this challenge be taken at night.

Listening Session: Candidates/public officials, homeless/formerly homeless persons, service providers, and/or advocates have a moderated, frank discussion about public policy, homelessness, poverty issues, etc., as well as the root causes and solutions that will end homelessness/poverty.