COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

A Call to Action to Support Street Ministries

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Developing a project that would engage a community is much easier than it sounds—if I walk away with nothing else, I know that that is something I have come to understand. However, deciding on the focus of the project and giving yourself time to implement change action is a whole different story when one puts themselves in a restrictive timeline. Being that I was out of the country—working nonstop each day on predetermined tasks—I found it very hard to calm down and narrow my focus on how I could initiate change to help improve the environment (and utilization) of a local Bellingham program known as CAST.

I have been involved with this program for the last two years and this year had the opportunity to coordinate one of the days. CAST stands for “Coffee and Sandwiches on Tuesday”, but it has more than that. Originally founded by Faith Lutheran and, true to its name, it was a street ministry serving coffee and sandwiches on Tuesday to the homeless individuals in Bellingham. The ministry soon realized that they didn’t have to restrict the outreach to just one day a week, so they added Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Then, they brought in different faith groups and various other backgrounds to oversee the different days. The ministry also had the task of distributing hygiene products, bus and shower passes, gloves, socks, and tarps when available.

Now, in my time helping with CAST, there has been a great depletion in the retention (and collection) of supplies to hand out to the homeless. I, personally, have not handed out shampoo, conditioner, or toothpaste (all items that, requested by those we serve, on a daily basis) in two months *at least*. But that wasn’t all that was missing. The affect the lack of supplies (and some other, varying issues) on morale for the volunteers behind CAST has started to become quite obvious. So obvious, in fact, that an emergency meeting was called to consider terminating the entire program. This flabbergasts me. So, at one point, I asked myself, *how could they let something that the homeless population* does *utilize just end*? With that, I felt the need for a call-to-action, a call to change the current atmosphere and improve morale through a few simple projects and one slightly bigger adventure.

There is great insight about lessons to be learned about street outreach organizations and ministries in *Practical Lessons: The 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research* by Fosburg, L.B., Dennis, D.L. (eds.). They remind us that outreach work is based on a foundation of *strong values*, *principles*, and *unique worker stances*. There is also the important reminder: engagement is key to the outreach’s success. Street outreaches, such as CAST, were created for the underserved and homeless who aren’t able or willing to seek services from existing agencies. We spoke in class about how charities sometimes end up continuing the cycles they are trying to help deplete. Street outreach is not a charity so much as it is an opportunity to engage with the homeless population in our midst. Through engagement alone, one can do a lot in regards to bonding with another individual (Fosburg 1999).

Now, the question is, how do I improve the morale within CAST? A lot of ideas were juggled in the last few weeks. I thought about qualitative and/or quantitative evaluations of the program to help the team have a clearer picture of what needs to happen. However, the program is often surveyed already, so I didn’t want to infringe upon the results they were collecting on their own. Then, I thought really long and hard about the lack of amount (and, often, quality) of resources. That is when I knew what I could do to affect the people working with *and* assisted by CAST. I decided to contact local businesses and ask them for donations and/or sponsorships of the items we lack most of all. To do this, I created a letter directed towards businesses that have travel-sized hygienic supplies. This letter gives the business a brief insight into what CAST does, then reflects on some of the needs within the program, and ends with a call to action/request for services from the business in question. The letter can be viewed in the **Appendix** below.

Next quarter, CAST volunteers and I will be reaching out to the community in a lot of ways. I will be sending letters to specific businesses that the leaders of CAST are currently narrowing down as well as any businesses that appears later down the road. A few of my peers will also be attempting to contact a woman that (as we have only just discovered) serves nutritional, homemade soups out of her car. It is our belief that by starting with these key actions, we can change the low morale of the CAST volunteers into a stronger, moral positive determination to reach out to Whatcom County’s homeless community.

**Appendix: SAMPLE LETTER FOR A BUSINESS**

(Date)

(Name)

(Business Name)

(Address)

(City, State, Zip)

Dear (Name):

I am a coordinator for the street ministry, CAST (Coffee and Sandwiches on Tuesday), here in Bellingham. CAST is one of many homeless outreach programs here in Whatcom County that work completely off volunteers and donations. We serve sandwiches, soup, coffee, as well as other beverages to the homeless population. Hygienic items are also handed out, when available. Once, we only served on Tuesdays, however, as the years have gone by, we have expanded our hours to four days a week. Now we are considering adding on an additional two days of service.

Currently, our program has been lacking necessary hygienic supplies for the homeless. These items include travel-sized shampoo, conditioner, razors, toothpaste, socks, and other such items. This last winter, many homeless individuals went weeks without being able to properly brush their teeth or clean the dirt and grime off their hair and skin. For some of them, this has become the norm—but it shouldn’t be that way. That is why the resources provided by program’s like CAST are so important to have at hand at all times.

**We would like to invite (Name of Business) to support our efforts to reach out to the homeless population of Whatcom County. We expect a large influx of individuals to use our services when winter outreach programs close.** The donations we are seeking include travel-sized shampoo and conditioner, razors, travel-sized toothpaste, floss, nail clippers, combs, and/or socks.

As a business that focuses on the happiness and comfort of your own clientele, we thought you would be interested in our efforts to expand that same idealism toward individuals without warm homes or beds to sleep in.

We have a plan to publicize this project as we proceed and we will be happy to recognize your business’s contribution in our promotional materials and in later reports on the project in our newsletter, on our website, and through other communications to the public.

I have included a pledge form should you wish to make a contribution to this important project in taking place in our community. Or, I will follow up with you within the next two weeks to discuss any questions you might have or to discuss your possible support. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_[*your name*]\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_[*your title or position, if any*]\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_[*your organization's name*]\_\_\_\_\_

Enclosures

References

Fosburg, L.B., Dennis, D.L. (eds.), Practical Lessons: The 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research. Delmar, NY: National Resource Center on Homelessness and Mental Illness, 1999. (Book Chapter: 24 pages)