

# SOUP RUN BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

*This best practice guide has been produced by ASLAN for Housing Justice/UNLEASH with funding provided by Shelter. It is intended as a guide, not as a definitive instruction on how to deal with every eventuality. It should be interpreted and applied with awareness of the complexities of work on the streets – that in many situations there is no perfect solution, whilst in many others there are a number of equally valid solutions. Although it is your duty to prepare your volunteers for every eventuality (e.g. violence and AIDS), it is important that they do not get the impression that every homeless person is violent or has AIDS, since this is clearly not the case. Finally, whilst this guide has been produced with care, neither ASLAN nor Housing Justice/UNLEASH nor Shelter accept any responsibility for loss or injury occurring as a result of the application of these guidelines by individual soup runs or other organisations.*

## SECTION 1: Operating Environment

*Give some thought to the practicalities of operating in this high-risk area of service before you set out on every run. It is also important that you balance the rights and needs of homeless people against the rights and needs of local residents and businesses.*

- Wear warm clothes that you won't mind getting marked or damaged
- Assemble all you will need before you set out: a first aid kit, a fire extinguisher, black bin bags (to collect used cups and sandwich wrappers before you leave each stop), (disinfectant) wet wipes for volunteers' hands, individually wrapped sandwiches (re-assembled into bread loaf wrappers marked with the contents of each loaf), plastic/polystyrene cups, tea and/or coffee and/or soup in containers with lids which can be screwed or clamped down, clothes (preferably pre-sorted and assembled into bags such as the flat canvas clothes bags sold by Ikea), a foldaway table(s) to serve drinks (or, if you will be serving soup/tea from a vehicle, a heavy duty plastic liner to cover the serving area), a mobile phone that is fully charged (and has credit, if pay-as-you-go), a torch
- Ensure that all objects which could cause injury or damage in the event of an accident are securely clamped or strapped in place, and that clothes and food are positioned to be served from different doors (if using a large van/minibus) or from different vehicles (if using cars)
- Ensure that all food is handled, stored and transported in a manner suitable for that food category (*see Hygiene below*) – some people make the false assumption that homeless people have “cast iron stomachs” – the reverse is true
- Have an agreed route and timetable **and stick to it**: people may have walked miles to meet you – don't leave them standing around in the cold
- Respect territory: park a little way away from sleeping patches, and let people who are clearly fast asleep and not in distress continue to sleep in peace
- Always hand out food, drinks, and clothing, rather than leaving people to rummage for themselves – it's more honouring, and it's less likely to lead to disputes and fights – try to ensure that everyone gets something and no one person takes lots of one item
- Give out food and drink before giving out clothes or blankets
- As most soup-runs operate after 9pm and before 8am, remember that these are times when both young children and the elderly are asleep: loud music, singing, or shouting are unacceptable in residential areas
- If you leave your vehicle to take food or clothes to people in dark and/or isolated areas, always work in pairs
- Always ensure that at least one member of the team has a mobile phone which is switched on, and ready to contact the emergency services if necessary
- Collect up used cups and sandwich wrappers when you leave each stop: put them in bin bags and take them with you
- Dispose of any unused food and drink at the end of the run – hot food should not be kept below boiling point for more than a few hours, and sandwiches should not be kept above 5°C for more than a few hours – so both are un-reusable at the end of an average soup-run

## SECTION 2: Engagement and Information

*It can be difficult to relate to someone who is mentally ill, or drunk, or on drugs. The best advice we can give is: "Be yourself – but think before you speak". Many of the people we meet are desperately lonely – just listening to them may be the most useful thing you can do, particularly at a first meeting. Try to establish relationships with other agencies and venues which work with the homeless in the area(s) you visit – this will make you more effective in helping your clients in an emergency.*

- Listen when someone is talking to you: if you don't understand what they've said, tell them so politely rather than giving some glib or non-committal answer
- Talk to people normally: the homeless may have more problems than you or I, but they have similar interests and concerns
- Practice being a listener rather than a talker – you should aim to draw people out and understand them before you start making suggestions
- Anticipate: be sensitive to a 'bad atmosphere' and/or an individual whose body language spells trouble and either be particularly conciliatory or walk away
- Get to know names: you will have more respect from people and more support when someone else is causing trouble if your clients view you as a friend
- Make yourself aware of the various agencies that can help the homeless and/or carry a Homeless Services Fact Card – make sure the contact details are up-to-date
- Don't try to have a rational argument with someone who is clearly irrational: people who are drunk and/or on drugs can be unpredictable - the less said, the better
- Don't take abuse personally: if someone takes out some of their anger and frustration on you, don't feel you must return it or defend your dignity
- Don't say "I know how you feel" or "I understand" - you can't possibly, and the homeless person is likely to tell you so in no uncertain terms!
- If you don't know the answer to a question or the solution to a problem, **never try to bluff your way out** – be honest enough to say "I don't know the answer, but I'll find out and give you an answer next time"
- Don't make rash promises: never make promises unless you are able to fulfil them - people will never forgive you for a broken promise (and remember, what seemed minor to you could have been terribly important to them)
- Don't give out personal details (like your home telephone number or address) to clients, even if you think you know them well – nuisance calls or unexpected visits are rare, but can be distressing when they happen
- Female team members should not agree to meet male clients/guests on their own – some men who appear perfectly normal can in reality be extremely dangerous individuals. In the same way male staff should not agree to meet female clients on their own - allegations can easily be made and they are difficult to deal with

## SECTION 3: Dealing with Difficult Situations

*Almost every distressing or violent incident which has occurred on soup-runs has happened because the team broke one or more of the four golden rules:*

1. Never intervene in an argument or a fight, and if you think there is a risk of serious injury, **CALL THE POLICE** quickly and unobtrusively
2. Never try to sort out aggressive individuals on your own (or with anyone else)– if someone physically threatens any team member, **IMMEDIATELY CALL THE POLICE** whilst quietly and calmly backing away from the individual

3. Don't try to be a doctor or a nurse (unless you are a doctor or a nurse!); don't apply a plaster to a cut - give it to the client to apply for himself/herself – and CALL AN AMBULANCE if you think the condition may be serious
4. Don't offer to use your car (or the soup-run van/minibus) to take someone to hospital – you have neither the life-saving skills nor the life-saving equipment of an ambulance crew – if it's serious enough for someone to need a hospital, it's serious enough for you to CALL AN AMBULANCE

*There are some other points to bear in mind when handling difficult situations, including two points worth repeating from the “Engagement” section above:*

- Anticipate: be sensitive to a ‘bad atmosphere’ and/or an individual whose body language spells trouble and either be particularly conciliatory or walk away
- Don't try to have a rational argument with someone who is clearly irrational: people who are drunk and/or on drugs can be unpredictable - the less said, the better
- Always remember that “a gentle answer turns away wrath” – apologising, even when you're not at fault, will often end a possible confrontation
- Don't get into disputes, and never ever try to restrain an angry person or push them away
- The best generals know that retreat is sometimes the only sensible option: don't hang around when the food and/or clothes have run out or when there's an ugly scene developing: make sure everyone's in the van and head off

## **SECTION 4: Volunteers – Recruitment, Training, Welfare**

*Whilst you can never prepare your volunteers for every situation and every personality type they will meet on the streets, it is your responsibility to give them at least a basic understanding of the main issues and main (mental) health problems they are likely to encounter, and it is your responsibility to protect your clients' health by ensuring that your volunteers have received at least basic hygiene training.*

- It is important that you specify on your volunteer application forms what references or checks you will require, and how you intend to store and use any personal information you collect from them
- Although it is not yet a legal requirement to conduct Criminal Record checks on volunteers through the Criminal Record Bureau (CRB), more and more agencies are doing so – it is important that potential volunteers are advised what checks you intend to conduct and why you intend to conduct them (you need to be able to produce a risk assessment document showing which categories of offence you believe pose a threat to your clients and/or other volunteers and **why** those previous offences would pose a threat)
- You also need to conduct a proper risk assessment covering health and safety for every area of service in which you operate
- All new volunteers need to be put through some sort of induction programme – **before** they start work on the streets – teaching them as a minimum the best practice guidelines for your soup-run and alerting them to the key health and safety risks
- You should have at least two Hygiene Certificate holders to supervise all food preparation, storage, handling and distribution (two ensures that at least one is on duty if the other one is sick or away)
- All volunteers involved in the preparation and distribution of food should have received basic hygiene training
- The better trained your volunteers are, the more effective they will be at helping homeless people, and the less risk they will pose to themselves and their clients
- Whether you organise it yourself, organise it collaboratively with others, or “buy in” to a programme run by some other agency, you should have an ongoing volunteer training programme which covers

areas like: nutrition and hygiene, drugs and alcohol, mental health, dealing with aggression, legislation relevant to homelessness and resettlement

- You should also provide team leadership and crisis management training for your team leaders, so that your volunteers are guided, supported, and motivated whilst working on the streets
- You should have some system of pastoral support for your volunteers – who can a stressed or distressed volunteer call or meet? – who is looking out for stressed or distressed volunteers? – who is ensuring that the team builds social rapport and social contact?
- A debriefing session at the end of each run can be a valuable learning tool and an important emotional safety valve if there have been distressing and/or dangerous incidents on the run

## **SECTION 5: Practicalities – Health & Safety, Hygiene, Insurance**

*With the presence of AIDS, Hepatitis A, B & C, drug-resistant TB, and many other diseases and parasites on the streets, it is important that volunteers take precautions to minimise their risk of infection.*

- Check with your doctor if you have never had a BCG (anti-TB) or hepatitis vaccination (explain that you are working with a high risk group for these diseases), and ask for a “HEAF” test for TB and/or a chest X-ray when you have a check-up (the risk of contracting TB is very small but the new strain is drug-resistant)
- Be aware of the risk of AIDS: keep well away from blood and open wounds or sores, and put a plaster on any exposed cuts or sores which you may have
- Have a bath and wash or air your clothes when you get back from work amongst the homeless – body lice and head lice are more common on the streets than amongst the general population
- Always wash your hands before, and maintain strict hygiene standards when preparing or handling food
- Keep meat and cheese separate from other types of filling when making sandwiches
- Make sure all sandwiches are kept refrigerated until the last possible moment before the run, and kept as cool as possible during the run
- Make sure all soup and hot food is prepared just before the run, and kept as hot as possible during the run – many people are surprised by how short a time food can be kept hot before the bacteria count starts to soar
- Don’t leave chilled food in warm places, or prepared food unwrapped if unattended, or use the same utensils for serving/slicing fresh meat, dairy products, and fruit/vegetables. Ensure you consult your team Food Hygiene Certificate holder for advice.
- Ensure that your organisation and your volunteers are insured against Third Party claims and Public Liability, and that your organisation is covered for liability in the event of an injury or a death amongst your volunteers whilst on duty – these days, personal injury awards run to tens – sometimes hundreds – of thousands of pounds