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Give to charities, not panhandlers

11 hrs ago



Elizabethtown Police Department spokesman John Thomas holds a sign that will be placed in Elizabethtown as part of the department's public awareness campaign about panhandling.

MARY ALFORD/The News-Enterprise

ISSUE: EPD, United Way post panhandling signs

OUR VIEW: Direct your giving more effectively

The business of panhandling continues despite public concerns about bogus beggars and government efforts to address safety concerns.

The latest effort, involving development of road signs by the Elizabethtown Police Department and United Way of Central Kentucky, strikes at the root of the issue — cutting off the flow of money.

It seems clear that when begging for money on street corners no longer is profitable, professional panhandling will end.

The signs have a catchy message: “Keep the change.”

That’s followed with a clear action statement. It says don’t support panhandling and includes an illustration indicating handouts are not welcomed.

But it goes further. The sign takes the warm-hearted motivation and directs it more effectively to www.etowncares.com, a website describing the value of legitimate charitable giving and how it can change lives for the better on a long-term basis.

Police cannot infringe on the practice of standing on the street corners with signs. The Kentucky Supreme Court has determined it’s a First Amendment form of guaranteed speech — just like a political statement or protest.

Panhandlers have been cited for stepping off the public right of way and into the street because of the inherent danger that may cause. Citations also have been issued for littering and restricting the flow of traffic.

Thanks to a new ordinance in Radcliff it now is illegal to linger in the intersection without attempting to cross and to approach a vehicle on the roadway for similar safety reasons.

The signage developed by EPD and United Way is a proactive effort to refocus caring local residents touched by these appeals, but interested in the best possible way to help the homeless and hurting among us.

Charitable organizations are the right answer. In a five-second decision to hand cash out a car window, it’s impossible to assess real need versus a professional panhandler preying on human sympathies.

Certainly, there are people down on their luck, but they will benefit most from a professionally administered service provided by a social service agency or qualified community charity.

A hand up is much more effective than a handout.

This editorial represents a consensus of The News-Enterprise editorial board.