

# Treat street people with dignity

By Greg Andrews

*This op-ed appeared in Cape Times 19 November 2013*

It's almost the holidays – time to enjoy family and friends. It's also a time when being confronted by a beggar is particularly uncomfortable. It would be nice if everyone had a safe home to celebrate family and friendship. But we know that for many “family” and “home” are dangerous or non-existent realities.

When someone asks you for a handout on the streets what is the right thing to do? The answer is simple when it comes to children (under 18 years of age). Do not give. The network of care established by organisations within the Western Cape Street Children's Forum is well placed and able to care for children. Giving to children on the streets makes it difficult for these organisations to do their work of protecting children.

The answer is not so simple when it comes to adults living on the streets. No one should dictate what you do with your money but in helping you make an informed choice I'd like to address a number of myths about life on the streets for adults.

**Myth: all beggars are street people.** A scruffy old man with alcohol on his breath asks you for some 'odds' as you come out the corner cafe. A woman with a child walks past your car window at the traffic light holding out a pleading hand. Because they are begging it's tempting to think that the circumstances of these

people are the same and that they live on the streets.

**Truth:** Not every person begging on the street is a street person. Many have a home to go back to. They commute every day to Cape Town's various urban centres to earn a living parking cars, picking up odd jobs or begging. These 'strollers'- as they are called - mix with street people and are often confused as street people. But they have a different set of problems and require a different set of interventions.

**Myth: all street people are beggars.** The man sleeping in a doorway

at night or pushing a trolley full of junk must be a beggar, right? After all,

how are they making money?

**Truth:** indeed, many people living on the streets do beg. But a significant number are not begging. Some park / guard cars, particularly at night, and have regular clients who trust them to deliver a valuable service. Other jobs include occasional labour and recycling collection. Most street people are surprisingly industrious and an important part of informal economies.

**Myth: street people make lots of money on the street.** Recent articles in various publications have suggested that street people make a good living begging on the street. Articles in the Cape Times and The Argus (October 11, 2013) covering a recent Homeless Day event



People from the street line up at a soup kitchen. Photo by Kent Lingeveldt

hosted by the City of Cape Town gave the (unsourced) figure of R1600 as a typical daily earning for a street kid.

**Truth:** At best a kid can make a few hundred bucks if exceptionally lucky. Street adults have an even harder time. In the same article that suggested the R1600 figure two adults who have lived on the streets said they typically earned up to R170 a day – that’s a good day for two individuals who would be amongst the top earners. Most street people make much less than that.

**Myth: giving to street people encourages them to stay on the street.** The Give Responsibly Campaign was started on the assumption that cutting off the supply of money to street people will force them to access the services available to them and get them off the streets.

**Truth:** This is a plausible and well-intentioned programme which is worth supporting. But money is not the only reason people end up living on the street. They are there because it is safer than where they come from or because they have nowhere else to go. The services currently available to people on the street are not comprehensive enough to be able to cater to the needs of those who have fallen through the cracks of our society. Most street people have already tried to use these services with little success. Cutting off a supply of income will not force these individuals to access services it will simply make them more desperate. Support Give Responsibly, yes, but bear in mind that it is not the only right response.

**Myth: it’s an easy life on the streets.** At the same Homeless Day event on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October the Social Development MEC, Albert Fritz, said “we need to make it uncomfortable for people to live on the streets” assuming that such a move would drive people living on the streets to use the services available to them.

**Truth:** Life on the streets is exceptionally difficult. It is violent. It is exposed. And the people ostensibly there to protect you are the worst threat to your health and safety. Street people are repeatedly arrested in operations aimed at removing them despite having committed no crime. Once arrested their belongings are removed which they seldom get back. This includes ID documents which are expensive in time and money to obtain. Without an ID they can’t get formal employment.

**Myth: the number of people living on the streets is increasing.** When you see an apparently new group of street people move in to an abandoned lot near your office it may be tempting to believe that this is a sign of the increasing number of people moving on to the streets.

**Truth:** In fact, the number of street people has remained relatively constant for years now. The organisations that work with street people are doing a good job at preventing new arrivals and early interventions that pick up new arrivals. The problem is most of the people currently living on the streets have lived on the streets for more than 2 years. Our services are not reaching them... yet.

**Myth: people living on the street wilfully refuse the opportunities offered to them.** You’ve heard the story about the beggar who was offered a job and turned it down because he earns more on the street?

**Truth:** There are undoubtedly individuals who have turned down gainful employment in favour of begging. But generally the stories are exaggerated or describe the exception not the rule.

**Myth: people living on the street choose not to use shelters.** It seems strange that there are people on the streets when shelter is available to them. Are they simply refusing the offer of help?

**Truth:** Shelters are full. The few that have a bed available are in outlying country towns. Many shelters are caring for people they are not adequately resourced to care for, such as those with mental disabilities. There are few places where such people can move on to even once they have settled back into a more routine life-style.

**Myth: people living on the streets should be re-integrated with their family or in their community.** Surely, services should focus on getting people back to the places they come from?

**Truth:** Yes, this is happening. Shelters and other services do focus on this but the opportunities to reintegrate people into communities or find gainful employment are few and far between. Most families and communities in Cape Town, as in South Africa generally, are highly stressed environments. Add high unemployment rates and we have an extremely hostile environment in which to find opportunities for personal reintegration and development. It's a slow process which creates a bottle neck for moving people on from the shelters.

**Myth: The situation is hopeless and there is nothing I can do.** The situation is complicated. How do you know if a beggar is legitimately in need or not? It's tempting to throw your hands up in despair.

**Truth:** While this is a complex problem, there are many things that you as an individual can do:

- **Treat people with dignity and respect.** Whether or not you decide to give money to someone on the street, offering people whom you encounter on the streets a friendly smile and a gentle

greeting doesn't cost anything yet is priceless for someone who is often forced to operate on the fringes of society. If they are providing a regular service to you, such as looking after your car, you may be able to come up with a better means of rewarding them for that service.

- **Share your time and resources.** You can donate money, time or goods directly to those NGOs who work with people living on the streets.

- **Speak up.** Society in general prefers to turn a blind eye and often treats people who live on the street as invisible and highly undesirable. By having conversations with your friends, family and colleagues and with street people you can help raise awareness of the fact that this is a complex problem that demands our collective attention.

- **Support change.** There are many reasons that people end up living on the streets that include unemployment, domestic violence, mental illness, and addiction. By supporting and lobbying for policies and structures that address some of these root causes you can help to prevent more people turning to the streets as their only recourse.

There's no one size fits all response that will not have unintended consequences. But a compassionate, well considered response can make a big difference in the life of another human being.

*Andrews is the Convenor of the Street People's Forum, a sector body formed by organisations whose clients include people living on the streets of Cape Town. He is also the Operations Manager of the Service Dining Room which serves hot meals to anyone for 5c.*