

HOW TO TREAT PEOPLE LIKE PEOPLE

a common sense approach to street outreach



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INTRODUCTION



When I founded Just Love More, Inc., it was built on a foundation that was based on the need for human connection, which makes street outreach one of the most critical components of my work. There are many factors that contribute to becoming unhoused, from financial crises and relationships that break down to unmet mental health needs and addiction.

I created This Podcast is Here to HELP in January 2025 when I couldn't find a podcast that treated homelessness with the care and compassion it deserves. This is the revised edition of my 2020 outreach guide of the same name, and when I

began to work on a podcast episode about outreach, I decided that it was time for a refresh.

This book is a common sense guide for people with an interest or passion for street outreach. It is based on more than 25 years of direct outreach experience, and is divided into sections that make it easier to prepare yourself for the best possible results in your fledgling outreach efforts.

If you start with an open and service-directed heart, you are all but guaranteed to be a success. Just devote some time and energy into preparing for what will be one of the most rewarding things you'll ever do.

You have the desire, but don't let it rush you into moving more quickly than you should. Take your time and digest the information you find here, and you'll be well on your way.

Michael Roth

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THE **T** LISTS

THE RESOURCE LIST

Before you begin street outreach, you will find it helpful if you take some time to familiarize yourself with the resources that are available in your area. Treat this like a research project and don't rush it. I cannot overstate the importance of this aspect of preparation, or how critical it is to have this on hand before you ever step foot out the door to begin outreach.

A quick Google search is not enough; devote some time and attention to due diligence, ask people you know about programs, services, and organizations that help those in need, then get on the phone or better yet, stop by in person. Too often what we find on the internet is outdated, and the last thing you want to do is offer someone hope for a service or program that doesn't even exist anymore.



A list of the most commonly-needed services might include:

- ✓ Emergency Shelters
- ✓ Emergency Food
- ✓ Food Banks
- ✓ Help to replace ID
- ✓ Clothing
- ✓ Medical Services
- ✓ Harm Reduction
- ✓ Mental Health Services
- ✓ Substance Use Services

In short, your list should be a ready-made resource that will help you answer questions about how to take care of the basic needs of anyone on the street. Once you have a solid list, choose the most relevant services and put together a printable document. This document is the first component of your outreach toolkit because it is a tool of empowerment; that is, it offers them information that can help them get the services they need to improve their situation. I keep a stack of these lists in my outreach bag along with a pen and a highlighter. When I talk to someone and ask what they are most in need of, it takes seconds to pull out a page on the spot, highlight the relevant services, and jot down any additional info that might be helpful.



Next, compile a list of your relevant contacts. This should be people who work in different fields that may have knowledge or experience with specific issues relevant to outreach work. For example, a nurse practitioner might be able to help you decide whether someone's symptoms indicate the need for someone to go to the emergency room or a walk-in clinic.



TOOLKIT 2



CREATING YOUR TOOLKIT

In addition to always having copies of the lists you made in the previous section, make sure you don't start street outreach empty-handed from a supply standpoint. You will engage with people who have a long list of needs and if you want to have any sort of luck with your outreach efforts, you need to build rapport and trust. Being prepared to meet a few of their basic needs will go a long way toward fostering that relationship.

ICEBREAKER

The best suggestion I have for beginners is to show up with something your target audience needs and offer it to them with no strings attached. I call this my Icebreaker. I haven't smoked a cigarette in twenty-five years, but I always have a pack of cigarettes and a lighter in my pocket or outreach bag. You wouldn't believe how many conversations I have been able to start because someone has asked if I had a smoke or a light. That's my Icebreaker. I don't make a habit of offering cigarettes to people, I simply provide one if asked. In that way, I'm not encouraging smoking, I'm encouraging conversation by meeting a basic need without judgment or obligation. You might want to try my idea, or your Icebreaker might be something else entirely. What you choose is up to you. Just make it small enough to carry in your pocket or outreach bag.



NARCAN

Whether you carry NARCAN®, or another brand of nasal naloxone, or intramuscular syringes, naloxone should be the first tangible item you stock in your outreach toolkit. You never know when or where an overdose will happen but with naloxone on hand you will always be prepared. Naloxone and overdose reversal training are available at no cost in most parts of the country.

Google “free Narcan in [City]” to find resources in your area, or reach out and I’ll do what I can to help you find what you need.

A few things to know about NARCAN: First, you can ignore the expiration date you see on the packaging. Naloxone has been tested extensively and has been proven to be fully effective, even 28 years after the date of expiration. Second, you can keep NARCAN in your backpack, purse, or glove box; research has shown that it is fully effective even after being exposed to high heat and cold.

The main point to remember is that you should use NARCAN if you have it, and you should always have it.

NOTE: If you are in Georgia, you can receive free overdose reversal training from Georgia Overdose Prevention, and if you are close to an at-risk person, you can get Narcan at no cost to you. Email info@georgiaoverdoseprevention.org for details.

FOOD & WATER

People on the street eat and drink when the opportunity presents itself, which means the odds are good that it's been a while since they had some water or something to eat. I keep a few bottles of water and some kind of healthy protein or granola bars in my outreach toolkit, along with any other food items that may have been donated or is

otherwise available at the time. Periodically, I'll make sack lunches with sandwiches, chips, fruit cups, and maybe some cookies if I have them. I can easily make 20-30 of these on my own in half an hour.



Sandwiches are among the easiest food items to use for outreach purposes. They are inexpensive and can be put together quickly, especially if you have a few volunteers on hand to make an assembly line. They are also a great option for getting young people involved in the hands-on process of volunteering.

Here are a few tips:

- ➡ Buy bread from the markdown section of the store the day you plan to make sandwiches
- ➡ Don't add condiments. They'll make the bread soggy and some people don't want them. I carry condiment packets for those who do.
- ➡ I use plastic wrap to wrap sandwiches. It's often cheaper than sandwich bags.

In addition to food that is meant to be eaten on the spot, I make it a habit to carry a food items that arenon-perishable, such as: tuna or chicken pouches, crackers, protein & granola bars, peanut butter, snack-size chips & cookies, nuts & trail mix in individual packages.



HYGIENE SUPPLIES

It isn't hard to understand why staying clean and sanitary can be a challenge when you are unsheltered. Toiletry kits are inexpensive and easy to assemble, and can be easily crowdsourced. A basic kit could be as simple as some soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, and deodorant, or you could include any other items deemed important in your area including razors and shaving cream, lotion, hair care items, etc.

SOCKS

People who don't live on the street cannot possibly understand how precious clean, dry socks are to people who do. Have you ever been caught outdoors in a sudden downpour and walked home with wet feet? Imagine living that way all day, every day. Then get some socks and put 'em in your bag.

FEMININE HYGIENE

People experiencing homelessness live with embarrassment and indignity every day. Think for minute about how that embarrassment would be compounded if you were a woman without access o hygiene products or the ability to adequately lean yourself. We took our cue from the incredible work of The Homeless Period Project in South Carolina and started creating Period Packs, a *"quart-sized zipper bag with tampons, pads, and wipes."*

NOTE: Makeup bags are ideal for this purpose, and many women have extras lying around the house that they are willing to donate. Donated purses and handbags are also great to have on hand for those in need.

OTHER OUTREACH SUPPLIES

As you can imagine, it can easily become overwhelming - not to mention heavy - to keep and carry the many different items that can be useful during outreach work. I have a large storage unit dedicated just to storing outreach supplies, but I know that's not realistic for most people - especially those who are doing periodic outreach on a volunteer basis. The best advice I can offer is not to try to be all things to all people; carry a few items (the ones mentioned in previous sections are the most commonly-requested). Over time you will learn what the people in your area need most, and adjust your outreach supplies accordingly. If you have room in your vehicle, you might consider carrying other items such as:

Hand warmers

Hand sanitizer

Umbrellas

Rain ponchos

Sunscreen

Toilet paper

Baby wipes

Fast Food/Grocery gift cards

PRO TIP: Empty Altoids® tins can be easily repurposed into miniature first aid kits. Add adhesive bandages, alcohol pads, antibiotic ointment or other common items and you're good to go!





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OUTREACH
ETIQUETTE

ETIQUETTE

Now that you are armed with the necessary supplies, let's explore the process of outreach itself. Everyone you encounter is a person, and they need to be treated as people first and foremost. Whatever they are experiencing in their lives, your presence should only exist if there is the potential that you

can help them in some way. If you are unable to approach outreach work without judgement, I would suggest that you find another form of volunteerism, because if there is one thing people on the street absolutely don't need is more gawkers judging them.

CLOTHING & APPEARANCE



The way you look when you do outreach can make a world of difference. After a lot of years working with people on the streets, I noticed that I tend to have a uniform of sorts. As a rule, you are most likely to see me doing outreach work (and just about everything else these days) wearing comfortable shoes or boots, cargo pants/shorts and a t-shirt. I don't wear colognes or scented body sprays, and I don't wear jewelry.

As a rule, I just don't want to look as though I am somehow better than the people with whom I will interact. For outreach, it's a good idea to not stand out; you're not going out to get attention, you're going out to connect with people where they are, and by dressing down you are making an unspoken connection. Whether it is readily apparent or not, the people you meet will notice.



LANGUAGE

I was a writer for decades before I started doing street outreach work full time, so I have always held a particular reverence for words. The way we speak, both to and about our target community, matters. It's about acknowledging and respecting the people with whom we interact on a level that ensures they feel heard and understood.

PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE

Person-first language is a way of thinking and speaking that identifies individuals as people before noting a condition. For example, instead of a homeless man, we would prefer to call them a person experiencing homelessness. Instead of terms like addict or junkie, we call them a person who uses drugs or a person with addiction. It is important to note that person-first language is only intended to be a way to remove judgment and stigma when talking about others; to always be mindful that we aren't dealing with conditions, we are dealing with people. Person-first language does not preclude someone from their choice of self identification. **What someone calls themselves is their choice, and should be honored.**

PRONOUNS

While on the subject of language and self-identification, let's talk for a moment about the importance of personal pronouns. Personal pronouns are the gender pronouns with which a person identifies. Examples of personal pronouns include she/her/hers, he/him/his, and they/them/theirs. The pronouns a person uses are an important part of their self-identification, which is why I ask for them at the same time that I ask for their name. When I am not aware of a person's pronouns, I default to "they/them/theirs".

GENDER AWARENESS

Another area of language that can be difficult to traverse is the subject of gender. To start, let's come to a basic understanding of the pieces of this puzzle. Biological sex refers to the sex someone was assigned at birth. Gender is the way we identify and/or express ourselves, and the term sexuality is commonly used to denote physical and/or emotional attraction. These three are often bundled together into a neat package, but the reality is much more diverse and nuanced. In order to understand and appreciate these differences, we need to see these pieces individually:

Sex at Birth: Female, Male, Intersex

Gender Identity: Female, Male, Nonbinary, Fluid, Agender

Gender Expression: Female, Male, Nonbinary, Fluid, Agender

Attraction*: Female, Male, Both, Fluid, Neither

**A quick note on Attraction (sometimes called "sexuality"). This may refer to physical attraction, emotional attraction, or both simultaneously. For example, it is possible to be physically attracted to males and emotionally attracted to females. It is likewise possible to not be physically attracted to either males or females (asexual), while being emotionally attracted to either, neither or both.*

Now that we better understand the layers of gender, we can have a conversation about language as it relates to gender, sex, and sexuality. It's natural to assume someone's gender based on outward cues (appearance, presentation), but to do so may not always give us the whole picture, especially when we are working with people experiencing homelessness or poverty. A trans woman without access to basic toiletries and hygiene products might have facial hair. She might not have access to hormone replacement therapy (HRT), and even these are assumptions because a trans woman does not need to shave, take hormones or have surgery to be a woman. We might likewise make assumptions about someone's attraction/sexuality based on the same cues, i.e. assuming that a man is gay because he is wearing nail polish.



In outreach work and beyond, use gender-specific language with care and sensitivity. When you don't know, ask. If it is not relevant or necessary, don't. Trans people are not here for your entertainment or education. If you're not providing medical care, for example, you don't need to know if a trans woman has had surgery, so don't ask to satisfy your curiosity.

Do ask to be corrected. Apologize when you misgender someone and take steps to ensure you don't do it again.



SELF CARE

I've saved what is arguably the most important topic for last, and I've done so because it took a long time for me to understand just how important it really is. Self care isn't just a buzzword, it's a necessary component of a healthy and productive life. As we have all heard every time we board an airplane, "you have to put on your mask before you put on someone else's". You don't put on your mask first because you're selfish, you do it so that you have the oxygen you need to do what needs to be done.



While I may be the person with the knowledge, skills, and experience to help, I will be no good if I haven't taken care of myself first. This can be a tough lesson to learn, but please believe me when I tell you that if you don't employ self care as a basic component of your outreach plans, those plans are going to fail.

SETTING BOUNDARIES

People experiencing homelessness and poverty may go days without a real conversation, so when you engage them it may be hard to know when to move on. Likewise, people in need are in survival mode and if you are the only person doing anything for them, they may ask for more than you are able or willing to give. Knowing how and when to say no is just as important as saying yes.

The reason I started this book with the section on lists is because the more research and information we have on hand, the more likely we are to be prepared to help someone meet their own needs. Not only does this empower the individual, it relieves some of the pressure that may be on our shoulders as well.



Outreach folks tend to be type who run full steam ahead until we collapse, but that's not sustainable and it's why so many well-meaning folks don't last. So how do we exercise self care and make sure we have staying power?

Set those boundaries. Have a pre-defined time limit on outreach work, and treat it like a job. If you're going out for 4 hours on a Saturday, set an alarm on your phone for 15 minutes before that 4 hours is up, and use those few minutes to wrap up what you're working on. Then stop. It's way too easy to tell myself "I can just do a few more minutes" and end up working hours longer than I'd planned.

Ask friends and loved ones to be your accountability partners. If you want to make sure you're living up to your commitment to yourself, ask people to help keep you in check. This is especially useful for those of us who don't know when to quit.

Get an (unrelated) hobby. Having a hobby you can devote personal time to can be a wonderful pressure release value. I'm not exaggerating whatsoever when I say that this may be the most critical component of my own self care, and it's one that I continue to struggle with even today. I'm an overachiever with high-functioning anxiety, so my natural inclination is to maximize my time by trying to tie unrelated activities together. The problem then becomes, if I'm writing as a personal hobby but I'm writing about work, then I'm thinking about work instead of separating myself from it.

Take a break. When outreach becomes a burden and not something you look forward to, take some time away to reset. It will recharge your batteries and help you to better appreciate the importance of this incredibly beautiful and fulfilling work of street outreach.

CONCLUSION

The information in this book is the result of years of experience and a lot of mistakes along the way. If I have learned one thing about working with people experiencing homelessness, poverty, unmet mental health needs, and substance overuse, it's that the thing that's missing more than anything else in street outreach is unconditional compassion. When you combine that with a willingness to listen, learn, and be respectful, there are few limits to what can be accomplished.

It's really that simple. Just treat people like people.