



AMHERST POLICE DEPARTMENT

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Giving alms to the poor has existed for hundreds of years and can be seen in a wide range of cultures and religions. This act of charity was perceived in many societies as a way of increasing one's virtue. One of Christianity's main goals was the act of giving money to the destitute. Islam as well emphasized the need of giving alms as it was the basis of one of the five pillars of Islam. In Canada, the act of asking for alms is commonly known as panhandling. While issues with panhandling have been much more commonplace in bigger centres, the Amherst Police does receive complaints of panhandling in the Town.

Panhandling can be defined as any solicitation made in person for an immediate donation of money or other gratuity. It can be performed vocally or non-vocally. Vocal appeals can be made through asking, demanding or coercing and non-vocal by simply holding up signs or holding out a hand.

Aggressive panhandling is a particular concern. Examples of aggressive panhandling are panhandlers who block a pedestrian's path on a sidewalk, follow people after they say no and continue to ask them for money, verbally threaten, or ask for money as people are getting in or out of their car.

The Amherst Police recommends that pedestrians discourage aggressive panhandlers by saying firmly "no thanks" and walking away. Don't argue with the individual and if they continue to be aggressive call the police. Walking with a purpose passed a panhandler may discourage them from asking for money.

My wife experienced an aggressive panhandler while walking in the downtown core of Regina. While browsing the shops, she was approached by a panhandler and gave some money out of her purse. As she started to leave down the street, the panhandler continued to follow her and it was only by luck that she escaped being mugged when two passersby came out of a nearby building. What was my wife's mistake? She revealed to the person that she had money by opening her purse. Residents should be mindful that some panhandlers have psychological issues and well meaning people are exposing themselves to possible verbal or physical assault when they interact with these individuals.

The majority of our panhandling complaints occur in the downtown, however, we also receive complaints of panhandlers operating at the malls.

There are different approaches which our department has taken to address complaints of panhandling. Focused foot patrols have been conducted. No Loitering signs have been posted in locations identified as problem areas. We have consulted and worked with local business that are impacted by the panhandling. We have also conducted enforcement of the laws.

Aggressive panhandling could in fact be an offence of Mischief. Mischief is defined in Section 430(1)(c) & (d) of Criminal Code.

Everyone commits mischief who wilfully:

(c) obstructs, interrupts or interferes with the lawful use, enjoyment or operation of property; or

(d) obstructs, interrupts or interferes with any person in the lawful use, enjoyment or operation of property.

The Town's Loitering Bylaw also provides another legal option to address panhandling.

Our officers try to resolve these complaints without having to resort to laying a charge. They speak to the person about the nature of the complaint and make them aware of the laws which apply. They also provide information to the individuals about support services available in our community and have also facilitated the initial contact with these agencies.

When you give money to a panhandler, you may actually be contributing to the problem. If the person has an alcohol or drug dependency you could be helping them to "feed" their addiction. If you feel that you must give something to a panhandler, think about giving them food or other items that may help our less fortunate. Another solution is to donate directly to the local food bank. The local food bank is located at 5 King Street and can be contacted by calling (902) 661-0677. It is open Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 1:30 p.m to 4:00 p.m.

Amherst also runs a soup kitchen every Thursday from 11:00 a.m to 1:00 p.m at the Salvation Army, 66 West Victoria Street. The soup kitchen is closed for the summer but will start up again in September. People are welcome to donate their time, money and/or food.

Helping our less fortunate is a responsibility of all our citizens but please do so in a safe manner.