

More than 30 U.S. cities restricting food programs for homeless people

by [Lindsay Ellis](#) in the [November 26, 2014](#) issue



INDOOR ONLY: Ken McEwan, a homeless veteran, poses at The Soup Kitchen, sponsored by Community Cooperative Ministries in Fort Myers, Florida. More than 30 U.S. cities have restricted or are in the process of restricting the sharing of food with the homeless. Photo by Joanne Ciccarello / The Christian Science Monitor

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) A 90-year-old man and two clergy received citations on November 2 after Fort Lauderdale, Florida, became the latest city to place restrictions on feeding the homeless.

Arnold Abbott, who founded Love Thy Neighbor in 1991, has been providing food to homeless people at a local beach for more than 20 years. “After I was cited, I took everybody over to a church parking lot. We did feed everybody. It wasn’t a complete waste.”

Abbott, who has been ordered to appear in court, faces a maximum of 60 days in jail.

The new regulations state that operations for feeding the homeless outside must be at least 500 feet apart, allowing for only one such station per city block. Feeding operations must also be 500 feet away from residential properties, the *Sun Sentinel* reported.

Although churches may host indoor feeding programs, all organizations serving food outside need property owners’ permission, the *Sun Sentinel* reported.

These stipulations, passed in late October, will limit options for the homeless, said Ray Sternberg, who works with homeless people at Fort Lauderdale's First Baptist Church. But he noted that churches can and will pick up the slack.

"It's going to cause confusion and hardship on the homeless," he said. "I think, though, that the ministries that are [feeding the homeless] on a consistent basis will find a way to help."

Sternberg joined the congregation in 1994 and recalls a Thanksgiving dinner held annually on a blocked-off area on the boulevard where the church is located. Carloads of volunteers would serve hundreds of homeless people each year, he said.

"You have so many homeless here in Fort Lauderdale, and the need is great," he said.

More than 30 U.S. cities have restricted or are in the process of restricting the sharing of food with the homeless, according to a report from the National Coalition for the Homeless.

The report, called "Share No More: The Criminalization of Efforts to Feed People in Need," aims to dispel what the authors call a widespread myth—that food sharing perpetuates homelessness.

"In many cases food sharing programs might be the only occasion in which some homeless individuals have access to healthy, safe food," the report reads.

Denver, Nashville, Philadelphia, and Phoenix are among the U.S. cities that have attempted to restrict, ban, or relocate food sharing, according to the report.

Houston is one of 12 cities that have passed a law restricting property usage, according to the report. The legislation stipulated that written consent is required to feed the homeless, and the authors worry that "the strenuous process to obtain permission will leave the homeless population without food."

These restrictions, which accompany greater hunger in cities, can come through three channels.

Cities may restrict the use of public property for food sharing, require groups to follow rigorous food safety regulations, and pressure organizations to relocate their programs, according to the report.

In Fort Lauderdale, David Raymond, who has more than two decades of experience in social service work, said he understands in part the decision to limit outdoor service. Feeding the homeless outside may not be the most effective solution, he said, because food should be a means to engage homeless people with other community services.

He said he believes people are better served in indoor areas where they can sit down, shower, and use the bathroom. But, he notes, “some people on the street are resistant to services.”

Another tension that can arise when organizations feed the homeless outside is between those providing services and area businesses.

When homeless people and businesses share a public area, Raymond said, it can “create some hostility” between business owners and people who are trying to do good.

Fort Lauderdale mayor John Seiler’s office could not be reached for comment by press time.

Anne Leomporra, who helped research the National Coalition for the Homeless report, said that the coalition’s nationwide offices have been keeping tabs on changed regulations for the past year.

While poverty continues for many U.S. citizens, Leomporra said that many residents of cities with tightening regulations are not aware of what’s at stake. Education, then, is important to changing the conversation. If anything, she said, these restrictions will make homelessness a more pressing issue for these cities.

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