

Spare a dime? Cities install meters to combat panhandling

By PAT EATON-ROBB
Associated Press

NEW HAVEN, Conn. — In cities across the country, parking-style meters collect loose change from donors in an attempt to cut down on panhandling — a strategy critics argue is wrongheaded and in vain.

New Haven is among the latest to install the meters, which sit curbside and collect donations in the form of cash or credit cards for programs that benefit the homeless. The city has four brightly colored meters in areas where panhandling has been a problem and plans to install six more to support local, non-profit organizations that help the homeless.

"It's meant to generate supplemental funds for homeless services and steer well-meaning, generously donated cash away from the business of panhandling," Mayor Toni Harp said.

The first meters went up in 2007 in Denver, and other cities have followed suit. They were recently installed in Pasadena, California; Indianapolis; and Corpus Christi, Texas. "We get at least one call a month from cities who are looking to replicate the program," said Julie Smith, a spokeswoman for Denver's Road Home, which runs the meter program in that city.

Some disagree

But some advocates for the homeless say the meters do little to stop the needy from requesting handouts and question whether it's worth the cost to install and maintain them.

Panhandling is not illegal, and people who need money will still ask for it, meters or no, said Mark Horvath, a national advocate for the homeless and founder of the advocacy group Invisible People. The meters,

he said, reinforce the stereotype that all panhandlers are bums who want money for drugs or booze.

"It's a false stereotype. A huge percentage of people who are panhandling are in housing, but they can't afford to make ends meet," he said. "There are so many better solutions than putting up meters, like the permanent support of affordable housing and a living wage."

Smith and others acknowledge they have no data or studies to show the meters have reduced panhandling, but say they are still worth installing as part of larger efforts to stem homelessness.

Joe Drury, 57, begged for change on a late December morning in Annapolis, Maryland, which has several downtown meters raising money to help defray transportation costs for people residing at a shelter.

"These meters just sit here all day, but nobody gives me nothing," Drury said. "I can sometimes go a whole day without eating."

700 meters

In Dade County, Florida, a food and beverage tax provides about \$24 million a year as part of a \$61 million budget for programs to help the homeless. Meters, by comparison, bring in about \$50,000 a year, said Ron Book, the chairman of the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust.

The program began a decade ago, and there are now more than 700 meters, many paid for by local businesses and supplemented by larger donation boxes inside many buildings.

All of them, he said, help reinforce the message that there is a better way to address the problem of homelessness than throwing money into a panhandler's cup.

Growing number of Americans are retiring outside of the US

By MARIA ZAMUDIO
For The Associated Press

Newly widowed, Kay McCowen quit her job, sold her house, applied for Social Security and retired to Mexico. It was a move she and her husband, Mel, had discussed before he passed away in 2012.

"I wanted to find a place where I could afford to live off my Social Security," she said. "The weather here is so perfect, and it's a beautiful place."

She is among a growing number of Americans who are retiring outside the United States. The number grew 17 percent between 2010 and 2015 and is expected to increase over the next 10 years as more baby boomers retire.

Just under 400,000 American retirees are now living abroad, according to the Social Security Administration. The countries they have chosen most often: Canada, Japan, Mexico, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Retirees most often cite the cost of living as the reason for moving elsewhere said Olivia S. Mitchell, director of the Pension Research Council at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.

"I think that many people retire when they are in good health and they are interested in stretching their dollars and seeing the world," Mitchell said.

McCowen's rent in Ajijic, a community outside Guadalajara near Mexico's Lake Chapala, is half of what she was paying in Texas. And since the weather is moderate, utility bills are inexpensive.

In some countries, Mitchell said, retirees also may find it less expensive to hire someone to do their laundry, clean, cook and even provide long-term care than in the United States.

McCowen has a community of other American retirees nearby and has adjusted well.



Joseph Roginski via AP

Joseph Roginski, right, holds a package in a storeroom of the Misawa City Hall in Japan, where donations of clothing and supplies were being kept for earthquake relief efforts. He says that while the cost of living is higher in Japan, access to health care is not.

Hurdles to overcome

But for others there are hurdles to overcome to adjust to life in a different country.

Viviana Rojas, an associate professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio, says the biggest obstacle is not speaking the language or knowing the culture.

"Many of the people we interviewed said they spoke Spanish, but they actually spoke very little Spanish," said Rojas, who is writing a book about retirees in Mexico. "They didn't have the capacity of speaking enough Spanish to meet their basic needs like going to the doctor or to the store."

Access to health care also can be a challenge. While retirees still can receive Social Security benefits, Medicare is not available to those living abroad, Mitchell said.

Joseph Roginski, 71, says that while the cost of living is higher in Japan, access to

health care is not. "Things are very expensive here. It is impossible to live off Social Security alone," said Roginski, who was stationed in Japan in 1968. "But health insurance is a major factor in staying here."

The former military language and intelligence specialist said he pays \$350 annually to be part of Japan's national health insurance. His policy covers 70 percent of his costs. The rest is covered by a secondary insurance program for retired military personnel.

Japan top pick

Japan experienced biggest growth, 42 percent, of American retirees than any other country between 2010 and 2014, according to data from the Social Security Administration. The large U.S. military presence in the country may be a factor.

There are more than 50,000 U.S. military servicemen and -women stationed in Japan.

The presence is so large that in the island of Okinawa, the U.S. military occupies about 19 percent of the area, according to Ellis S. Krauss, professor emeritus of Japanese politics and policy-making at the University of California, San Diego.

Roginski, who volunteers for the Misawa Air Base Retiree Activities Office, said he helps connect more than 450 retirees and their families living in Northern Japan with resources. He said he would never move back to the United States.

"We have a real strong sense of security here," he said. "I can leave my door unlocked and no one will take anything. When I go to another country I feel nervous, but when I come back I feel like I'm home."

Mexico has become home for retired firefighter, Dan Williams, 72, and his wife, Donna, 68. The couple has been living near the same retirement community in Lake Chapala for 14 years.

"The climate and the medical services are very good," Williams said.

Williams teaches painting to adults and children and puts together a monthly magazine for the local American Legion. He is also a member of the Lake Chapala Society, which offers daily activities for American retirees.

It was those same services that attracted McCowen to the region.

"Before moving, I found out how many widowed and divorced women lived here," she said. "There is comfort in numbers."

She says she loves being in a lively community.

"I see older people walking year round. I see them all over the place even in their wheelchairs. If they were in the U.S., they would probably be in a nursing home," she said. "I don't think I could move back."

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