

**Service
and
Sensitivity**



**Working with
Partner Families
and on
Critical Home Repair sites**

Ask yourself:



- ❧ What does “low income” mean?
- ❧ What does “low-income housing” look like?
- ❧ What does a “low-income family” look like?
- ❧ What is a “deserving” family?
- ❧ What is a “critical need” for housing?

Answer honestly, and consider how your personal history affects your perceptions.

Then ask yourself:



What am I willing to do to *change those perceptions?*

- ❧ Am I willing to discard my own perceptions?
- ❧ Am I willing to talk openly and honestly with a low-income family, and begin to see the world from their viewpoint?
- ❧ Am I able to discard the notion that the words “low income” makes us different people?

What am I willing to do to *change those realities?*

- ❧ Am I willing to work hard to change the physical reality of substandard housing?
- ❧ Am I willing to engage others to do the same, to spread the word and build a community focused on giving a *hand up* to those in need?
- ❧ Am I willing to do all this *just because it needs to be done*, not because I seek only self-meaning or gratification from it?

Because there will be challenges.



Habitat prides itself on bringing together diverse groups of people to serve the same purpose.

And like any diverse group, there will be different world views, opinions, and perceptions.

In order to work together, be positive, be productive, and be healthy, we just need to talk honestly and listen openly.

So let's talk openly and honestly:



- ❧ Not every partner family is going to be what you expect.
- ❧ Not every CHR site is going to be what you expect.
- ❧ Not every volunteer is going to know how to deal with those unfulfilled expectations.
 - ❧ To keep things positive and productive, you may need to help them understand how.

So here are some of the questions you may need to field:



The fancy car / phone / TV problem:

“That’s a \$30,000 car in the driveway.

I can’t even afford that.

Why are we helping this family?”

“I can’t even afford that. Why are we helping this family?”



Problem one: The assumption of widespread luxury.

- ❧ One luxurious item does not speak to a life of affordable luxury.
- ❧ Consider *owning* a car versus *financing* a car: a nice car can still be affordable if it's financed with good credit. And *any* car can be affordable on a monthly basis... it just may not be financed *sustainably*.
- ❧ It may not even be theirs. It may be a visitor, it may be a shared car, they may be borrowing it.
- ❧ It may have been bequeathed -- if that was your grandmother's car before she passed, would you sell it?
- ❧ If there are four people of driving age living in that home, is it more sensible to own one nice, reliable, fuel-efficient car and share it – or own four crappy ones that break down and guzzle gas?
- ❧ It may be the last nice thing they have left. In the case of someone who *had* a secure job, a home, and all the assets to correspond – when you lose your job, the car is the last to go. For example, that car could belong to a son who had to move back home and is trying to keep up appearances while he searches for a new job.

“I can’t even afford that. Why are we helping this family?”



Problem two: Projecting *personal* views of luxury and poverty on someone else’s situation.

- ❧ We all prioritize differently. Everyone has something they “splurge” on. Some people take a big vacation every year. Some have a gorgeous kitchen. Some have an expensive hobby like skiing.
 - ❧ Who are we to judge if this person’s choice is a nice car? Or a big television?
- ❧ It may also be an issue of professionalism. Smart people with good jobs can still be low-income, and they still need to present themselves professionally – right down to the car they arrive in.

“I can’t even afford that. Why are we helping this family?”



Problem three: Confusing the meaning of “low income.”

- ❧ There are many ways to define “low income” using population statistics and other metrics, but it does *not* mean “poor.”
 - ❧ **Low income**, as we define it, means earning between 35% and 60% of the Average Median Income.
 - ❧ **Working poor** means people who are *working* but whose incomes still fall *below* a given poverty line.
 - ❧ And *neither* of these definitions mean **impoverished**.
- ❧ Home improvements (especially big ones like new roofs or new windows and siding) are *expensive*. Often they require home equity loans – and without significant equity and income, affordable and sustainable loans are *very* hard to obtain.
- ❧ So remember, just because a family is financially unable to perform a costly home repair *doesn’t* mean they can’t otherwise provide a comfortable life for their family.

Another type of question you may need to field:



The cleanliness / appearance problem:

*“This place is a dump, couldn’t they have
cleaned it before we got here?”*

“This place is a dump, couldn't they have cleaned it?”



Problem one: Varying perceptions of cleanliness.

- ❧ Someone who is *not* low-income – someone who is, let's say, middle class:
 - ❧ Can afford to live with more space (in their house, their yard, garage).
 - ❧ Can afford to access more storage, if necessary (storage facilities, storage buildings)
 - ❧ Can afford to offload some of their material resources when they feel “cluttered,” knowing that they can get more when they need them.
- ❧ A low-income family can't always afford to do all of these things.
 - ❧ There is less space in which to live, much less in which to store things – both inside and outside.
 - ❧ What outside space they have is likely to be lower quality and less protected; things will get damaged.
 - ❧ A low-income family can't afford to throw away resources they may need again, knowing it is unlikely they can just go buy new ones.

“This place is a dump, couldn’t they have cleaned it?”



Problem one: Varying perceptions of cleanliness.

- ❧ So your idea of a messy yard or a cluttered driveway or garage may just be a low-income family trying to retain what resources they have.
- ❧ And your idea of a nice yard might be an immaculately landscaped lawn with trimmed hedges and a flower bed – but an older couple with physical limitations just needs a low-maintenance space where their pet can run without needing to take them for long walks.

A note on fault, perception, and casting stones:

- ❧ Remember – you may think your kitchen is spotless, but *somewhere* in the world is someone who would be horrified by *your* level of cleanliness.
- ❧ Our conceptions of “clean” are based on our history, how we were raised, what is feasible given our time and resources, and our priorities.

“This place is a dump, couldn't they have cleaned it?”



Problem two: Understanding what “to the best of their ability” may mean.

- ❧ Sometimes ability is limited by **resources**. That's the reason families partner with us; because otherwise they don't have access to those resources.
 - ❧ Whether it's a ladder to clean the gutters, trimmers to clean up the trees and bushes, or a truck to haul big garbage items away, *it costs money*.
- ❧ Sometimes ability is constrained by **physical limitations**.
 - ❧ That could mean physical capability (in the case of a disability), safety (not having the training/tools to do it safely) or even time (single parent working two jobs).

There will be *other* questions;
there will be *more* concerns.



But no matter what the question or concern or problem is,
we can deal with it *positively*.

After all, we are all here for one reason: to *help*.

When in doubt, remember: *we are here to serve.*

Understanding the definition of service



Service means something different to everyone who performs it and benefits from it.

☞ But let's agree on a few simple principles of service:

☞ **The people we serve need it.**

☞ Our selection process guarantees this. If we are partnering with a family, they need our service.

☞ **We give it willingly, with an open heart, to benefit others instead of just ourselves.**

☞ We are not here solely for self-gratification. We hope you feel good after volunteering, but we hope that's not the *only* reason you volunteered.

☞ We know that our hands will be dirty and our backs will be sore – and we do it not for ourselves, but for a well-deserving family. We expect nothing in return but the knowledge that we have helped.

☞ **We should learn and grow because of it.**

☞ We should be willing to step outside of our comfort zones and broaden our views of the world and people in it.

☞ *We should always seek understanding, not judgment.*

Understanding the definition of service



All of this is more rewarding for everyone involved
if we all focus on positivity.

We choose to focus on our shared experiences
and on building a rewarding relationship with each other
...even if just for a day.

And always remember:



This is *not* just a construction site.

This is a home.