

# U.S. Mayor Gives Panhandlers Jobs

The *Washington Post* last week [published a story](#) about a unique initiative in Albuquerque that puts panhandlers to work.

There's a Better Way, a program initiated by the Mayor Richard Berry, offers \$9 an hour (plus free lunch) to panhandlers who are dispatched around the city on beautification projects. The results, so far, look pretty good.

[Via the Post:](#)

*In less than a year since its start, the program has given out 932 jobs clearing 69,601 pounds of litter and weeds from 196 city blocks. And more than 100 people have been connected to permanent employment.*

*"You can just see the spiral they've been on to end up on the corner. Sometimes it takes a little catalyst in their lives to stop the downward spiral, to let them catch their breath, and it's remarkable," Berry said in an interview. "They've had the dignity of work for a day; someone believed in them today."*

What's interesting about the project is that it offers multiple benefits. The city is cleaned, the hungry are fed, and the destitute receive the satisfaction of a hard day's work. The importance of the last item is not to be underestimated.

Nicholas Smith, a professor philosophy at Macquarie University, has [written on](#) what he calls the benefits and dignity of work.

*Research shows that physical and mental health are adversely affected by lack of work. You are more likely to suffer from*

*obesity and depression, for example, if you are unemployed. This may be linked to another good that work helps to provide: self-esteem.*

*Self-esteem, in the sense of having a perception of the worth of one's own existence, is bound up with the recognition one receives from others of one's competences, achievements and contributions.*

Aristotle, Smith points out, divided work into two categories: *praxis*, which is action done for its own sake, and *poiesis*, or activity aimed at the production of something useful. The idea of work as *poiesis* (a means to an end) rather than *praxis* (something intrinsically good) is the primary view today. Smith suggests this is a flawed outlook, one potentially harmful to healthy democracy.

*By participating in the division of labour, the French sociologist Durkheim observed, individuals can come to a livelier appreciation of their dependence on others and the need for cooperation.*

*And day-to-day practice in the activity of cooperative problem-solving, the American philosopher John Dewey persuasively argued, provides vital training for the citizens of a healthy democracy.*

The program in Albuquerque is unlikely to prove a panacea in alleviating poverty, but it seems like a simple way to at once improve the city's aesthetics and help the poor.

If there is an intrinsic value in work, as Smith and Aristotle suggest, does it stand to reason that such programs could be superior to traditional welfare programs? Could programs such as There's a Better Way be successful on a larger scale?

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