The Practical Stuff

1. **What is MLF and how did it come to Belmont?** Mobile Loaves & Fishes is a social outreach ministry to the homeless and indigent working poor. Their mission is to “provide food, clothing and dignity to our brothers and sisters in need.” Started in Austin in 1998 where it now has nearly 6,000 volunteers and 8 trucks, it’s recently come to Nashville. To read more, check out [http://www.mlfnow.org/](http://www.mlfnow.org/). MLF came to Belmont in the fall of 2007 when Dr. Andi Stepnick incorporated the service into her Introduction to Sociology courses. Her students (along with a few others) and faculty and staff drivers—all-but-offered 18 runs throughout the fall. Dr. Stepnick, Sara Hylton (the MLF program coordinator and a BU social work major), and Micah Weedman, BU’s new Director of Outreach are now trying to expand the program for the future. (We’re also looking for locals to pitch in from Nov 19-Jan 19th until the spring runs get up and going. If you live nearby, consider having your family and friends do a run. mail the MLF coordinator, Sara Hylton at shylton@mlfnashville.org.)

2. **How can I help?** You can prepare and serve food with MLF throughout the semester. Sometimes you will load clothing into the truck for distribution. (See below) You’ll work in teams of five—4 students and one team leader/driver from the faculty or staff. Belmont teams do runs on Tuesdays and Fridays from 4-8 and on Saturdays and Sundays from 1-5pm although other days and times are available. You can help as much or as little as you like. If you participate in a student group, organize them to help! Email the MLF coordinator, Sara Hylton at shylton@mlfnashville.org to learn more. ([Community Service Convo is available.](http://www.belmont.edu/uc/pdf/ComService.pdf)

   The following comments from students who have already participated may inspire you!

   *One of the most appealing aspects for me was that it gives you the interaction with people. There is something distant for me in giving away canned goods or donating money. And don’t get me wrong- any contribution we can make impacts the world. But for me, I needed to see it. I needed to be with people, to shake hands and ask them how they are doing. After counting down for weeks, today was my lucky day…. This was an incredible experience for me that brought a lot of emotions; humility, joy, and disheartenment are the first to come to mind. But also ignorance- ignorance I hope to lose in the weeks, months, and years to come."

   Today was awesome, it was an incredible experience. I think everyone in the group really enjoyed it. We met a lot of really neat, interesting people. I can’t wait to do it again. Thanks for the opportunity.

   *It was such a great experience, at the very least, every Soc faculty and major should be a part of such a wonderful and *sociological* experience. It is so much more than giving out food….you are on their "turf," so to speak, and you are hanging out with them, really seeing how most of these people live..It is just very exciting to actually go to them and be welcomed into their "neighborhoods." We walked around "tent city," which Bill described as a place you would not go to at night. It is under a bridge in downtown Nashville and is truly a community. Set up all around are make shift shelters and tents, with decorations, porches, etc. You can see how there is a strong attempt at "normalcy," and yes, most of these people work. Ah...such a good, good, experience. Thanks, again for the opportunity! Did I tell you how much I love, love, love it?"

3. **If I don’t want to make/serve food, how else can I help?**

   - Gather things MLF can use such as:
     - Small toiletries -- shampoos, conditioners, soaps, combs, lip balm, lotion, nail clippers, tampons and feminine hygiene products, shaving cream/razors, toothbrushes/paste, toilet paper, bug spray for the
Use your Bruin Bucks to buy food such as bottled water, Gatorade, fruit, cookies, and peanut butter crackers. (Drop off box outside 300H Wheeler or to the St. B’s at 4800 Belmont Park Terrace – see below.)

Donate your unused food at the end of the year instead of throwing it in the dumpsters.

Donate your unused laundry detergent at the end of the year instead of throwing it in the dumpsters so that we can make cleaning kits (e.g., bar of soap, shampoo, laundry detergent, quarters for laundry).

Send a monetary donation to MLF at PO 40347 Nashville TN 37204.

Get involved in Hunger and Homelessness Week at Belmont (email Andy Watts at wattsa@mail.belmont.edu).

Take courses such as Sociology of Inequality and Poverty & Justice in the Bible.

Read more about hunger and homelessness (e.g., The Betrayal of Work) and if MLF isn’t your thing, volunteer with other local groups working on food/poverty issues such as:

- Second Harvest Food Bank at [http://www.secondharvestnashville.org/](http://www.secondharvestnashville.org/) he purpose of the organization was to provide a central distribution center for companies, groups, and individuals who wished to help provide food for Middle Tennessee's hungry. Second Harvest's mission is to feed hungry people and work to solve hunger issues in our community.

- Nashville Homeless Power Project at [http://homelesspower.org/](http://homelesspower.org/) Is an organization comprised of homeless and formerly homeless people confronting the root causes of poverty and oppression. We fight for the human rights of all poor people while striving for the civil rights of those who remain on the streets. We believe that housing, healthcare, food security and use of public facilities are rights that we all deserve. We develop concrete solutions by building power through relationships with our brothers and sisters in the streets, allies, and decision makers.

- Campus For Human Development and Room In The Inn at [http://www.chd-nashville.org/](http://www.chd-nashville.org/) The Campus for Human Development is a religious non-profit organization, which was formed in 1995 by the merger of three other organizations: Room In The Inn, The Guest House, and FOCUS (Faith Organizations in Covenant for Understanding and Service. All three provided services to the homeless in Nashville.

- Oasis Center at [http://www.oasiscenter.org](http://www.oasiscenter.org) -Oasis Center offers a full spectrum of opportunities for youth, from crisis to leadership, as illustrated by the graphic below.

- Project Return [http://www.projectreturninc.org/](http://www.projectreturninc.org/) - Provides GED / adult literacy training, employment placement assistance, job counseling, and direct aid (bus passes, food boxes, and clothing) to recently incarcerated individuals.

- Read [http://thehomelessguy.wordpress.com/](http://thehomelessguy.wordpress.com/) by Nashville’s own, Kevin Barbieux. It has an amazing number of useful resources, especially its insight into Nashville’s situation.

- Learn more about homelessness and working poor in your community and ask your community leaders to take productive action to help the homeless and indigent working poor. You can write Mayor Karl Dean at: Mayor's Office
  100 Metro Courthouse
  Nashville, TN 37201
  Phone: 615-862-6000
  Fax: 615-862-6040
  [http://www.nashville.gov](http://www.nashville.gov)

4. Where is MLF Located and How Do I Get There?
MLF is housed at St. Bartholomew’s church at 4800 Belmont Park Terrace near campus. (Ideally, you and your group members will carpool to St. Bartholomew’s Rectory—better for community building and the environment.) To make all the sandwiches and load the truck, we need everyone there, on time, ready to go. **Thus, you should leave Belmont at least 15 minutes ahead of your shift** start time.

From Belmont the easiest way is to go straight down Belmont Blvd until it dead ends past Lipscomb. Go right at the stop sign onto Shackelford. After about one block (just past the house on the corner with the pine fence), go left onto Belmont Park Terrace. Stay on Belmont Park Terrace until you reach St. B’s. As you approach the parking lot, take the driveway that is farthest away from the church. **Look for the silver MLF truck just out back of the house on the right side of the property** (not the church side). If you miss it, just walk over.

5. **What if I need to miss my shift?** Ideally, that won’t happen because you’ll mark your calendar, email yourself a reminder, put up post-its, or do what it takes to not double-book yourself or forget about your commitment. So, you probably won’t miss your shift except for illness or emergency. In case of illness, please try to find a replacement from class or ask a friend from outside of class. In an emergency, contact Sara at shylton@mlfnashville.org. If fewer than 3 people show up we have to cancel the run.

6. **What Do I Wear? What should I bring with me?** You represent Belmont. You will also be walking among and talking with the homeless and indigent working poor. So, it’s best to be respectful and not wear midriff shirts, see-through clothing, flashy jewelry, or very short skirts/shorts. Instead, **WEAR COMFORTABLE CLOTHES** that you don’t mind getting dirty. (Attack of the Mustard!) Wear shoes that you can comfortably walk in. Wear a coat or other outerwear if the weather calls for it because we’ll be outside. You may want **sunglasses and a bottle of water.** Sometimes having a **pen and paper** is handy. And, if you’re trying to earn Convo, you need to **bring your form** with you to be signed by your team leader. Lastly, don’t forget to **eat before you arrive.**

Someone from each shift should pick up 4 bags of ice. We need these for health regulations. If you can stop at the Bi-Lo on your way that would be great. Please let Sara Hylton know by emailing shylton@mlfnashville.org or calling 615-460-0172. Or, people could donate a bag of ice--if it fits within their budget. The bottom line let us know who is willing to get it.

**Tips on Interacting and Handling Different Situations that You Might Encounter**

7. **What Do I Say to a Homeless Person?** “Hello” is a great start! 😊 Seriously, though…just be yourself. You might say, “Hey, how are you doing?” Or, “Hey, how’s your day been?” Then, perhaps, add, “Could you use some food tonight?” Feel free to shake people’s hand –just as if you would in a “normal” situation. Remember that we’re not just giving food; we’re acknowledging people and showing care and concern.

Be open to whatever conversation happens. People might tell you about their kids, their jobs, their needs, or the weather. (Andi says: On one run, I had a conversation with someone about art—the color wheel, how to draw, etc.) You could say “Hey Buddy! How’s it going?” with a big smile, exactly as if I knew them forever and just hadn’t seen them in a couple of weeks. Put out your hand and say thank you ma'am or sir, and of course make good eye contact. You could ask them their names and where they are from and go from there. Some folks like to pay compliments, too, and when they light up, it becomes apparent they are not used to hearing them. Usually the folks we serve will offer info about themselves, when asked. Really, if you are just truly interested in their lives, there will be no shortage in conversation.

You’ll find that homeless people are a lot like non-homeless people—some are outgoing and funny while others are shy and reserved. Some suffer from depression, stress, substance abuse—just like the non-homeless. (They just can’t hide it as easily as you or I can in our homes.)
In some cases, you might observe something about them such as a cut on their arm or a bruise. Feel free to ask what happened or if they need assistance. (We often have band-aids and alcohol wipes on the left side of the truck by the condiments.) If it feels right, you could gently touch their arm as you talk or give a warm handshake goodbye. (If you volunteer enough and get to know people, those handshakes often turn into hugs.)

That said, remember to always respect people’s space until you are “invited in” or acknowledged. For example, do not just barge into the tent community. Honk the horn, wait by the truck, wave….people will come. (Note: Sometimes along 1st avenue by the park or other locations you may wish to pull over and park along the road and walk through the park in pairs asking people if they “could use some food.”)

8. What if People Ask for Extra Food? To some degree, this is up to you because if someone asks, it’s usually because they need it. They may not have food for the next day or they may have buddies they want to get food to (this is very common in the tent community, for example). It’s fine to give someone more than one bag. The only time this might not be ok is if there’s a long line of people waiting and you think you’ll run out. So, this is a judgment call on your part. If you feel you need to ration, just say something like, “Unfortunately, since this is just one of our first stops/we’ve got so many people in need, I can only give you one bag right now.” (You might remind them that we’re doing *nearly* daily service through mid-November so that they will probably see us soon. And, don’t forget the laminated info sheet on other sources of help.)

Sandwiches don’t store well once we make them so feel free to be more generous as the evening goes on. If it looks like you’ll have extra food, you can also ask people if they have food for the morning or buddies who might also need some food.

9. What if People Ask for Extra Clothing? As with food, to some degree this is up to you. However, because clothing is usually more limited in supply than food and since we can store “leftovers,” we tend to hold back just a bit. So, for example, if someone wants 5 pairs of socks, you can say something like “Unfortunately, since this is just one of our first stops, we can only give out 1-2 pairs of socks so we have enough for everyone.” Or, you may need to limit folks to one sweater not two.

10. What if Someone Wants a Ride Somewhere? MLF has a policy against transporting people. You can say something like “I’m sorry, we’re not allowed to provide transportation” and refer people to the bus system. In emergencies, you can call emergency services and wait with the person until appropriate assistance arrives.

11. What do I do if Someone Asks for a Specific Kind of Help such as Drug Rehab? We don’t expect you to be experts. Inside the truck is a laminated sheet that lists all sorts of information about services in Nashville. Just get the information the person needs and return the laminated sheet to the front of the truck. You can ask, “What kind of help do you want?” Sometimes people just want to talk. Others are not ready to accept services that are available. And, don’t forget that you can always ask your Team Leader for help. If you’re stumped by a question, you can also offer to get people’s cell phone number (lots of folks have phones) and tell them you’ll pass along the question and will try to follow up. Then, email the MLF coordinator, Sara Hylton at shylton@mlfnashville.org.

12. What Do I Do If Someone Asks Me For Money? MLF is in an organization that gives food, clothing, and a touch of humanity to those in need. They have a policy against giving money. (In certain situations you may want to give someone bus fare or a dollar or two to get a fast food deal if we’ve run out of MLF food. That’s ok.) (It’s also ok if you don’t feel comfortable doing giving money.) In general, you can just say, “I’m sorry, we don’t give money.” We want to keep the focus on food aid. Not carrying money may also deter possible problems that could arise if we were giving out money to everyone.

13. What’s the Best Way to Deal with Crowds If They Occur? Sometimes there are a lot of people. Sometimes there aren’t. Depending on the situation (e.g. crowd size, location, time of day) it may feel best ask folks to form a line to reduce the chaos. Some volunteers can make the food bags while others chat with folks.
If you are distributing clothing and you have 4 volunteers, it’s best to have two people servicing both sides of the truck. If there are only 3 volunteers and that’s impossible, you can say something like “Because there’s just one of me, if you could form a line that would be great.” In crowded situations, be firm as needed so you don’t feel overwhelmed. Don’t be afraid to say, “I’m sorry. I need you to form a line so I can serve every fairly and quickly. Otherwise, I’ll have to close this side of the truck until the other volunteers can help me. Thanks.” Chances are this won’t happen but just in case…(Andi learned this the hard way.)

14. Doesn’t Giving Out Food Encourage Folks To Spend Money on Alcohol?  MLF’s mission is to “provide food, clothing and dignity to our brothers and sisters in need.” However, giving food doesn’t create homelessness. As you learn more, you’ll see the major reasons for homelessness are complex and have more to do with larger structural and cultural issues such as lack of a living wage and lack of affordable housing. (Some folks you meet will be the working poor.) So, while it’s true that some homeless people drink—just like in the “regular” population--don’t be concerned that giving food creates homelessness. (Remember that correlation is not causation!)

15. Isn’t Volunteer Work Like This Dangerous?  Not really. Any fear you’re feeling is probably a response to the way we’ve been socialized to see homeless people as dangerous. Fear is Future Expectations Appearing Real. Remember that MLF has never had ”an incident” in all their years. Also, we do take some precautions:

- Each truck is driven by a trained adult who can determine what fits everyone’s comfort level. A team leader won’t take you anywhere that they feel is dangerous. For example, we won’t go walking in the “tent city” at night.
- We’ll stay in well-lit areas. (At the Drake Motel, for example, drivers should always park in a way so that both sides of the truck are perpendicular with the street, not parallel to it, so that if giving away clothing and food, volunteers and recipients aren’t near traffic.)
- Night runs will always have at least one man. (Andi says: Again, MLF has never had “an incident” but I suspect that one dude wouldn't prevent problems if a “troublemaker” wanted to create them.)
- We encourage you not to carry or give away large amounts of cash. (That way we won’t be known as people who carry it!)
- In general serving the homeless is just as “dangerous” as going down 2nd ave on a Sat night (IMO) or just as “safe,” depending on how you view it.

16. What Do I Do if the Police Ask Us To Move?  Some police officers may respond negatively to MLF due to pressure put upon them to move the homeless out of our/the tourists’ view. If the police ask you to move, you can engage them while being respectful and polite asking if you can finish your food distribution in a few minutes and then leave. However, if they say “no” do not argue with them. Go.

17. Is It Appropriate To Offer Prayer?  You will find that many of the people we serve are deeply religious. If you get that signal or if it feels right to you, you can offer a prayer. Remember that you don’t know people are Christian so you may want to keep your prayer non-denominational (e.g., Dear Lord/God…rather than Jesus.)

18. What is The Center for Contemplative Justice?  Becca Stevens and members of the St. Augustine’s community formed the CCJ about 6 months ago to encompass the programs that they are a part of via the St. A’s community. So, for example, work with Magdalene and Thistle Farms. They have registered www.centerforcontemplativejustice.org but have yet to build the site. Keep an eye out for it.

19. What’s in the Back of the Truck?  Note that the back of the truck opens. There’s a water container (just over the black and red coffee spouts) that you can fill with the white hose that’s on the side of the house. When you return after your run, please drain the container (overnight) by pulling down on the spout. Then we can refill it with fresh water the next day.
**Key Contacts and notes about a few Locations:**

Fisk Court – Cadillac

Tent Community – Ed. BTW, if the gate is locked at Tent City, honk your horn as much as possible. Then park by the train tracks and walk down the path next to the fence …holler as you go for Mike, Cynthia, Johnny, and Glenn in the first camp. They will go get the others.

Drake Motel: Park up on the sidewalk far enough that people doing clothing distribution aren’t in the road. Move the vehicle as far down away from the check in as possible. Then, go in to the desk and tell Mona you’re there. She’ll call everyone. Be sure to take Mona food, too. Deliver to Lila in Rm 123. Graciously accept any money that she offers. (You can pass it on to someone if you run out of food.) **Jerry is in room ___________** and has cancer.

**Also note:** You may want to keep a few “emergency” bags of food in the truck in case you run out and then see someone who is *very* needy. This is also helpful in case you see someone on the road as you’re going from one location to another.