

**PASSAIC CITY**

# Passaic sets up mailboxes for homeless people, and it could be life-changing

**Matt Fagan** NorthJersey.com

Published 4:48 a.m. ET Oct. 12, 2020 | Updated 5:38 p.m. ET Oct. 12, 2020

There are a multitude of reasons why people wind up homeless.

Once they are out on the street, there's a big factor that keeps them from finding the help they need: no mailing address.

Among homeless advocates, some know it as the "postal paradox," because people are trapped in a Catch-22: Homeless people can't get the help they need because they are homeless. Driver's licenses, SNAP debit cards and even paychecks typically require a mailing address.

Enter the city of Passaic, which is now providing secure mailboxes to people living on the streets.

Getting mail "is something that people take for granted every day," Passaic Mayor Hector Lora said, adding that he got the idea after being out canvassing among the city's scores of homeless residents.

Passaic has installed mailboxes at its Dignity House on Broadway, the city's resource center for the homeless.

## Postal paradox

A 2017 study by Britain's Citizens Advice network explored the postal paradox.

No mail means no letters from loved ones, no access to government services, an inability to give a potential employer an address. To open a bank account also requires an address.

This fall the city installed 21 mailboxes at Dignity House, at Linden Street and Broadway. Its clients almost immediately began receiving mail.

"Five got their Social Security cards mailed to them," said Maggie Rivera of the city's Human Services Department.

Mail is delivered to 276 Broadway and collected in a secure box. Then it is either put in one of the secure mailboxes or hand-delivered to those who show up on Friday, the day set aside for people without homes to shower, do laundry and get a haircut.

## The reaction

Denville's Social Services coordinator, Stephen Dublanica, called it "an excellent idea," but not necessarily a panacea.

Dublanica recalled trying to help a homeless man reinstate his driver's license. The man needed a mailing address, so officials wound up renting him a post office box.

He also faced challenges in replacing government-issued debit cards for items like food stamps.

"It was a nightmare," Dublanica said.

Janice Kaniewski, CEO of relief organization NJ 211, said although it is not uncommon for local charitable organizations to accept mail for their clients, a dedicated mailbox is great idea.

"Employers want an address to send information," she said.

Kevin Donohue of St. Peter's Haven in Clifton said St. Peter's will accept mail for its clients, but for a city government to do it is unusual. Having mailboxes dedicated to individuals gives them privacy and may enhance self-worth.

"It is a cool way to do it," Donahue said. "It feels different. It feels better."

NationSwell, a national organization of service-minded leaders, noted last year that the Cathedral Basilica of St. Joseph in San Jose, California, has used a similar approach since 1983. The church has a window where about 150 people collect their mail.

*Matt Fagan is a local reporter for NorthJersey.com. For unlimited access to the most important news from your local community, please subscribe or activate your digital account today.*

*Email: [fagan@northjersey.com](mailto:fagan@northjersey.com)*

*Twitter: @fagan\_nj*