

About Our Shelter Guests and Some Suggestions on Conversation

Our guests come from The Gathering Place, a drop-in center in East New York, Brooklyn, which is their home base during the day and is managed by CAMBA, the largest non-profit social service agency in Brooklyn.

All Shelter guests are screened by CAMBA including for the following: a) visual assessment for alcohol and drug sobriety and general hygiene; b) health assessment including respiratory and covid symptoms, and TB; c) psychiatric and psychosocial evaluations by a competent professional; and d) screening all guests for weapons and contraband prior to leaving the drop-in center. All guests have received the covid vaccine.

Volunteers sometimes wonder how to relate to and speak to our guests. The best advice is to remember that they are people, like us in many ways, and to treat them as such. They all have come from very difficult places and are working to improve their situations. Some have children and families, some in this area, others in different cities and states. Some have jobs or have been searching for jobs. They all are working with social workers from CAMBA, and CAMBA is helping them find jobs and permanent housing. When they come to us, usually they are hungry and tired, and they want to get to bed soon after dinner. Their days start very early.

Some of our guest want to chat during the dinnertime, others prefer to stay to themselves. You can be respectful of both. Please don't stop talking to other guests just because one guest is the quiet type. And don't take it personally if someone does not want to talk.

We find that those who like to chat, talk about sports, movies, celebrities, food, health issues, their jobs and what is going on in NYC. Some of our guests are willing to discuss their personal situations. A good conversation starter is to ask if the guest is from NYC and if they have been to BHS before. It is helpful to find out what they like to eat (note it in the notebook so we can share with other cooks).

You can learn the names of our guests when they sign the logbook before dinner. Their names are also printed on the manifest from CAMBA. It is nice to use their names.

One more thing about interacting with guests. Our liaison at CAMBA, reminds us to keep relationships outside our personal realm. For example, we should not ask a guest to do odd jobs for us, nor should we offer any jobs or housing, or job/housing referrals. If we can be helpful to guests in some way outside the shelter context (for example, if we know of an appropriate job or apartment), we should contact CAMBA and let the professionals at the agency handle it.