

## CLINICAL//TRANSLATIONAL

### SIGNS of HUMANITY

People who use signs to ask for help (“panhandle”) are a very visible fraction of a city’s underserved or homeless population. Yet, they are rarely heard. The signs they carry are artifacts of this phenomena, but they do not tell the complete story.

The Signs of Humanity Project was a researcher-artist collaboration that explored the interactions between people who are “panhandling” and those who pass by.

The Project’s research arm qualitatively explored the experiences of people who panhandle; and its artistic arm created an exhibit intended to mitigate this community’s dehumanization. In July 2018, artist **Willie Baronet** worked with **Rosie Frasso, PhD**, CPH, public health program director, and a team of MPH and MD students to begin data

collection and artifact acquisition. Baronet purchased more than 100 signs from their owners—paying on average \$10 for each and offering materials with which to make a new sign. Those who sold their signs were then asked to participate in a brief interview where open-ended questions explored their interactions with passersby, their opinions about how money collected is used by other people who panhandle and their perceptions of how the opioid crisis has affected them.

In September 2018, Baronet curated an exhibit of the signs purchased on the streets of Philadelphia. In addition, during a special public program at the exhibit, Dr. Frasso and the student team presented their preliminary research findings. Key among those findings was the fact that the great majority of interview



respondents reported feeling invisible and isolated, and noted that the opioid crisis exacerbated their sense of isolation. On the other hand, they reported feeling both comfortable and pleased that their signs would be used in an exhibit designed to get people talking about homelessness.

Baronet also gained a novel perspective from the project—that of a researcher. He observed that, “It was cool to be working with students who are so analytical and research driven and had a huge level of compassion and empathy.” ■