

Schaefer gives lobbying tips to homeless Marylanders

Tell legislators to put themselves in your shoes, he advises crowd

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SUN STAFF

As many as 400 homeless Marylanders and their supporters got a lobbying lesson yesterday from former Gov. William Donald Schaefer, who urged them to promote their legislative interests by educating senators and delegates.

"Ask them if they've ever lived on the street when it's colder than 32 degrees," he said during a speech at St. John's College, near the State House.

"Ask them if they've ever been to a shelter when all there was was a cup of soup. Just say 'There but for the grace of God you could be homeless, too.' Play on their conscience, and you'll get to them."

And he had a few "don'ts" as well: "Don't tell them 'You've got money for everything but us,'" he said. "And don't challenge them by saying, 'You've got money for a stadium.'"

After the speech, representatives of the group met with legislators, then rallied in front of the State House. The "lobby day" was organized by Action for the Homeless, a statewide organization.

The former Maryland chief executive and mayor of Baltimore recounted his own education on

the precariousness of life, the psychology of homelessness and the difficulties of arranging for shelters.

People may think that building soup kitchens or shelter is easy enough if the money is available, he said.

"Not true," he said. Neighborhood residents often resist having a shelter in their midst, he said, but they need to recognize that accountants, school teachers — "people who are on top of the world" — can be toppled by a bad "bounce of the ball."

Mental illness, family rejection and economic misfortune push people into the streets, Mr. Schaefer said. Then, he said, they are caught in a downward spiral.

When he was mayor or governor, Mr. Schaefer said, he frequently tried to help individuals he saw on the street — but learned they were not always eager to receive it. Sometimes, they had been turned out of the state's mental hospitals, a policy he opposed as mayor and governor.

"And I was right," he said. The policy known as deinstitutionalization, he said, merely created more homelessness.

Cutting programs for the poor, the former governor said, can be easy because the poor are defenseless.

"Who do you cut? You cut people who can't object, who have no spokesman," he said.

Yesterday, of course, they had a former governor.