

Heroes

\$1.9 Billion
Federal spending in 2012 on
homeless assistance grants

\$3.1 Billion
Annual consumer spending on
camping and trail sports gear



Take it from me...

» **Banish assumptions.** Sixty percent of the homeless in Colorado are families. Most suffered a life-altering event and had no network of friends or family to save them.

» **Donate.** Take gear you no longer use to a local shelter or homeless resource center (email ken@homelessgear.com for help finding one that accepts gear near you); consider checking with local scout troops and schools about their needs; and check out our list (below) of other organizations that accept donations of used camping equipment.

» **Ditch perfectionism.** Most items don't need to be repaired to be functional. A broken zipper on a bag might be a deal breaker for you, but would be welcomed by someone sleeping on a blanket.

» **Involve suppliers.** Ask retailers to donate damaged goods rather than throwing them away or returning to a manufacturer.

» **Recruit others.** Hold a gear drive (scout and other youth leaders, this means you!).

Other ways to give
Adventure 16 Donate-A-Pack Foundation
Bring all types of gear to A16's Southern California stores, or send by mail. Info at donateapack.org

Sierra Club's Inner City Outings Program
Email ico@sierraclub.org to coordinate giving good-condition warm clothes, sleeping bags, packs, and tents to your local chapter.

Ken John, 55

This former executive helps the homeless by distributing used camping gear.

Each time Fort Collins, Colorado, resident Ken John saw a homeless person pushing a cart or lugging garbage bags stuffed with possessions, he thought about all the old backpacks in his garage. As the owner of an athletic equipment company (Promats) and an avid backpacker, climber, and runner, John had years' worth of well-loved gear lying around, including a half-dozen perfectly serviceable packs, bags, and tents.

After selling his business in 2007, John searched for an organization that supplied used camping gear to the homeless and was surprised to find no one doing it, not even the Salvation Army or Goodwill. "I'd been experiencing a growing, nagging, desire to give something back," he says. "It dawned on me that I was positioned to do just that." In May 2008, he founded a nonprofit called **Homeless Gear** and began collecting equipment he thought could be put to good use on the streets. He also reached out to manufacturers like Kelty, REI, and Sierra Designs to solicit returns, samples, and prototypes destined for the landfill.

That first year, he gave away 1,682 items from the trunk of his car and from the lawn of a local shelter. Four years later, Homeless Gear has distributed (through a network of Colorado facilities) outdoor equipment worth more than \$2 million, including more than 37,500 of what John calls "The Big Eight" items: sleeping bags, pads, tents, packs, daypacks, blankets, coats, and boots. "The project grew much faster than I ever anticipated," he says. "The idea really resonated with Colorado's outdoor community."

He says the nonprofit never gets enough daypacks, which are essential for holding identification and paperwork the homeless need to carry at all times. Other high-demand products are those that help prevent frostbite and hypothermia during Colorado's winters. (Learn how to donate at homelessgear.com.)

This year, John took his program into the streets. Three nights a week, trained pairs of volunteers headed out into Fort Collins to connect directly with the homeless, offering gear, emergency items like blankets and first-aid kits, and contact information for housing, food, and job resources. From January to September, they assisted 700 people. Now, based on the nonprofit's success in Colorado, John envisions the model spreading to other cities and has already been contacted by people interested in starting their own branches.

"As outdoorspeople, we can get sentimentally attached to old gear—it starts to feel like a friend," John says. "Homeless Gear's mission is really to help people see their accumulated items in a new light. That sleeping bag that's been in the closet for six years? It could save someone's life this winter."

Nominate A Hero Let us know about your favorite inspirational tale of recovery, achievement, or service at heroes@backpacker.com.