Serving Without Judgment

At Center of Hope, every guest deserves to be treated with dignity. That includes people whose circumstances we do not understand and people whose choices we might not make ourselves.

We see only a small part of someone's life. How a person looks, smells, speaks, or behaves does not give us their full story. Our responsibility is to serve respectfully, follow established guidelines, and bring concerns to staff.

Do not measure need by appearance.

A guest's clothing, vehicle, phone, jewelry, or carefully maintained appearance cannot tell us whether they need assistance. Possessions may have been purchased before a crisis, borrowed, or received as gifts. Someone may put considerable effort into looking presentable while struggling to afford groceries.

Likewise, worn clothing, dirty hands, unwashed hair, or poor dental health tell us little about a person's character, work ethic, or willingness to improve their circumstances.

Guests should not have to look a certain way to receive our respect.

Respond to hygiene concerns with discretion.

Body odor, smoke, strong fragrances, or soiled clothing can cause an immediate reaction. Be aware of your facial expression, body language, and tone. Wrinkling your nose, stepping away dramatically, exchanging looks with another volunteer, or making comments can embarrass someone.

Limited access to laundry, showers, clean clothing, or stable housing may contribute to hygiene difficulties. Health conditions, disabilities, and other circumstances may also play a role. We generally do not know the explanation, and we do not need to guess.

Do not make jokes, discuss the guest's odor with other volunteers, or offer unsolicited hygiene advice. If a concern affects your ability to serve, food safety, or another person's health, speak privately with staff so they can address it discreetly.

Be careful about interpreting behavior.

A guest may seem withdrawn, impatient, distracted, unusually talkative, suspicious, or uncomfortable. They may avoid eye contact, speak abruptly, repeat questions, or struggle to follow instructions.

Stress, pain, grief, hearing difficulties, language differences, disability, or past experiences may affect an interaction. These are possible explanations, not diagnoses for volunteers to make.

Avoid quickly labeling someone “rude,” “lazy,” “unstable,” “high,” or “difficult.” An unfamiliar manner of speaking, moving, or responding is not enough to establish what is happening.

Speak clearly and calmly. Give the person time to respond. If instructions are not understood, explain them another way without talking down to the guest.

Do not require guests to perform gratitude.

People express appreciation differently. Someone may be embarrassed about needing help, preoccupied with a crisis, or simply quiet. A guest who does not smile, make conversation, or say thank you still deserves courteous service.

The same applies when someone declines an item. Food preferences, allergies, health needs, religious practices, or limited cooking facilities may influence what a family can use. Ask what would be helpful within the available choices.

Keep boundaries focused on behavior.

Serving without judgment includes maintaining shopping limits, appointment procedures, personal boundaries, and safety expectations. Volunteers are not expected to tolerate threats or harassment.

Address the specific action calmly: “Please lower your voice so we can work through this,” or “I’m going to ask a staff member to help us.”

When reporting a concern, describe what happened rather than assigning a character or motive:

- “The guest raised their voice and interrupted the instructions,” rather than “They’re an aggressive person.”
- “The guest appeared unsteady and had difficulty answering questions,” rather than “They were drunk.”
- “The guest requested additional items after I explained the limit,” rather than “They’re greedy.”

Report immediate safety concerns promptly. You do not have to determine the cause before asking staff for help.

Protect dignity when the guest is absent, too.

Do not discuss a guest’s appearance, odor, behavior, or personal circumstances casually with other volunteers. Share relevant concerns privately with the staff or team leader responsible for addressing them.

If a conversation becomes judgmental, redirect it: “We may not know the whole situation. Let’s bring the concern to staff.”

Our Christian faith calls us to humility, compassion, and love of our neighbors. At Center of Hope, those commitments should be evident in our expressions, our words, our patience, and the way every guest is welcomed.