

Homeless Encampment Sweeps Do Not Solve Homelessness

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Everyone at least knows someone who will drive past a homeless person and say something like, “there’s a ‘now hiring’ sign right there, why can’t they just get a job like the rest of us?” or maybe make a comment about how drugs will put you in a position like that. Executive director of affordable housing company Home Forward, Michael Buonocore, says that “one of the fundamental misunderstandings [about homelessness] is that people don’t understand it, but think that they do. There are simple solutions to end homelessness, but there are also simplistic solutions and I just wish that people would feel comfortable in the way that I feel comfortable knowing I don’t understand neuroscience,” (Zapata, 2021). Many people, when addressing the issue of homelessness, are quick to blame those experiencing homelessness. They assume that homeless people made mistakes that resulted in their homelessness. When directing criticism toward individuals experiencing homelessness, they fail to address the systemic issues like housing costs, low wages, and the criminalization and dehumanization of homelessness that prevent people from being rehoused. One act of criminalization and dehumanization of homelessness is the clearing of homeless camps, also called encampment sweeps. Encampment sweeps harm people by taking away their belongings and forcefully removing them from a place they call home. There are far better solutions to homelessness than encampment sweeps. Sweeps only attempt to push the problem out of sight. Cities must divert money spent on encampment sweeps to programs that successfully rehouse people experiencing homelessness.

So, what are homeless encampments? The National League of Cities (2022) describes homeless encampments as temporary areas where people experiencing unsheltered homelessness stay. They are a community of people living in tents, makeshift structures, and vehicles. The National League of Cities (NLC) is an organization dedicated to strengthening local governments and advocating for cities in the United States. The NLC holds conferences and provides local

government leaders with education and research for improving citizens' quality of life. You might wonder why people living in encampments don't just go to shelters. To that, the NLC responds: shelters can be an "inappropriate option" for some people experiencing homelessness. They explain that some people have had poor experiences in shelters, such as abuse and assault, separation of family and pets, lack of secure storage for belongings, and even specific times for entering and leaving the facility, keeping those with incompatible work hours from using the shelter. For some unhoused people, encampments are the best or only option. Those struggling with addiction are often unable or unwilling to go to shelters because of sobriety rules and a lack of support (NLC, 2022).

Homeless encampments are not an ideal place for people to live, but they have been found to benefit people experiencing homelessness by providing them with a community. In the report of a study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Lauren Dunton et al. gives examples of a sense of community felt in some encampments:

Residents of encampments often described other people in the encampment as family who provide support for each other. A current resident of Pierce encampment in Houston explained how she feels a "part of a community and a family," and she feels safe in the encampment because of that fact. "[Among the residents] I'm like the momma; they love me and I love them," she said. She makes sure everyone is fed and keeps medical supplies and clothes for people who need them. Two men in the People's Park encampment in Tacoma who called themselves "overseers" of the encampment explained that everyone knows everybody else, and they have "developed community." Residents in People's Park are like neighbors, borrowing things from each other and resolving disputes that arise. In Chicago, a woman said that although people in her encampment

came from different backgrounds and were racially diverse, “We’re family and take care of each other.” People helped each other if someone got sick or needed food or warmth.

Encampments provide some people experiencing homelessness with protection and community in a way that shelters can’t. When going through a difficult situation it’s comforting to be a part of a community that cares and understands what you’re going through. The woman living in the Houston encampment feels so much love for her neighbors in the encampment that she sees them as family and makes sure they are healthy. It’s important to understand why homeless encampments exist. Despite harsh weather, encampments are sometimes more favorable than shelters.

Some people don’t like the presence of encampments in their communities, usually demanding that something be done to remove them. A common response by cities is homeless encampment sweeps: the forced removal of homeless people and their belongings from encampments. They are usually organized by local governments and often involve the police (Qi, D. et al., 2022). In a study published in March of 2022, multiple healthcare providers reported negative impacts on the mental and physical health of homeless people after encampment sweeps, which in effect, impact the healthcare system (Qi, D. et al., 2022). Qi et al. explain that sweeps sometimes result in the loss of medical equipment, things such as medication, and medical devices, which tend to be difficult to replace. They also found that sweeps can cause stress and trauma, oftentimes making other chronic conditions worse. Also, they noticed that after sweeps, patients may lose access to outpatient care and utilize outpatient care more, which becomes more costly to healthcare systems.

A more efficient and moral way to put an end to homeless encampments is to provide people experiencing homelessness with permanent housing and services, as well as address the

root causes of homelessness. One model is the Housing First approach. The National Alliance to End Homelessness' website writes: "[The Housing First approach] is guided by the belief that people need basic necessities like food and a place to live before attending to anything less critical, such as getting a job, budgeting properly, or attending to substance use issues," (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2022). Many people living in tents describe it as a full-time job, it takes a lot of work taking care of your tent and many fear leaving their encampment out of fear of their belongings being taken. Being provided permanent housing and food takes off some of the stress of homelessness, allowing people to work on taking care of their health and getting stable jobs. Keeping people at risk of homelessness in stable housing also prevents the trauma caused by homelessness. In "How to Address Homelessness: Reflections from Research", a journal published in The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, authors Katherine M. O'Regan, Ingrid Gould Ellen, and Sophie House review research on finding solutions for homelessness. They claim that the most efficient way to solve homelessness is to address the root causes: housing affordability and low incomes. They call for cities to focus on the creation of affordable housing and the reduction of poverty. O'Regan et al. also mention the Housing First Model, they write that services for the homeless focused on substance abuse and mental health don't help these people find stable housing.

Unsheltered homelessness and encampment sweeps are currently a huge issue here in Minneapolis. According to a KARE 11 News article published October 6th, 2022, titled "Activists set up camp outside Minneapolis City Hall to protest encampment clear-out", a large homeless encampment was evicted in the Near North neighborhood of Minneapolis. Following this encampment sweep, advocates from this encampment set up tents in front of Minneapolis City Hall in protest, saying they would stay put until Minneapolis responds with "more

permanent solutions,” and a complete pause on homeless encampment evictions. On October 10th, these activists held a press conference in front of city hall, a video of it posted along with the KARE 11 article. They reiterate many of the points I made previously in this paper, encampments are like a family, shelters are not a permanent solution, and encampment sweeps are traumatic (KARE 11 Staff, 2022). Unfortunately for activists and people living in encampments, Minneapolis City Council voted against temporarily stopping homeless encampment sweeps on October 20, 2022. The eight city council members who voted against the proposal claim that it isn’t in city council’s power, it should go to the mayor’s office (Birnstengel, 2022). Unfortunately, Mayor Jacob Frey has shown little interest in the issue. He vetoed a city council measure from the October 20th meeting “which would have studied the impact of clearing encampments and police involvement in those sweeps” (KSTP, 2022).

Although there is more to be done, Minneapolis and Hennepin County are making progress when it comes to providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness. “Minneapolis and Hennepin County [...] have invested more than \$200 million into efforts to improve shelter conditions and keep them open 24/7, and support new cultural and gender-specific shelters. And since 2019, the city has seen record-high annual affordable housing production and preservation levels -- with several hundred more units in the pipeline in the next few years,” (Star Tribune, 2022). One program that Minneapolis provided funding to is Avivo Village: a warehouse in Minneapolis’ North Loop neighborhood containing 100 tiny houses designed to provide shelter and services to people experiencing homelessness. Their primary goal is to get people into permanent and stable housing while addressing issues with other shelters that make people reluctant to use them. “Avivo Village serves a population that emergency and transitional housing systems previously struggled to reach at all: people who

opted out of shelters and lived outdoors, often while struggling with mental illness, substance use disorder, or trauma.” They have “served more than 300 people since it opened in December 2019, and placed nearly 100 into permanent supportive housing” (Hutton, 2022). Avivo Village is an excellent example of the type of support needed to end homelessness. It proves that there are far better solutions for removing encampments than sweeps. This is a small feat considering that in a single night in January of 2022, there were 7,917 people experiencing homelessness in Minnesota, 22% of which were unsheltered according to Minnesota’s HMIS annual Point-In-Time count (HMIS, 2022). There is still much to be done but we are slowly making progress here in the Twin Cities.

Although it would be better to provide people experiencing homelessness with shelters and services like Avivo Village, encampments benefit them. Encampment sweeps are detrimental to people’s well-being and it would be more beneficial for cities to use their funding on more permanent solutions. Learning more about why homeless encampments exist and how dangerous encampment sweeps are is the first step we need to take to understand the problems with our government’s way of addressing homelessness. It’s heartbreaking driving down 35W and seeing people sleeping in tents across from the Quarry shopping center in NE Minneapolis, especially now that winter is here. It’s even more heartbreaking realizing that these people live with the constant fear that they might have to relocate at any moment. With a better understanding of homelessness and its root causes, we can use empathy and compassion to end it in our communities.

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