

Why a Campground for Homeless People?

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Why does Portland need a campground for homeless people? How would a camp like this benefit the community? Why should the city of Portland support such an effort?

Businesses downtown complain about homeless people urinating in their doorways. Visitors complain about homeless people panhandling them. Neighbors complain about homeless people causing them fear of crime. Parents complain that homeless people scare their children. Library patrons complain that homeless people smell bad. Neighborhood associations complain that services for homeless people attract more homeless people to their neighborhoods. Grocers complain that homeless people steal their carts. What can be done? How to relieve these problems?

A campground would provide a safe haven to homeless people. Somewhere they can sleep without interfering in the operation of business downtown. Somewhere they can be safe from the drug dealers and crime scene rather than being confused with this criminal crowd. Somewhere they can use a sanitary restroom or get clean to look for housing and employment. Somewhere they can receive mail and phone messages from landlords and employers. Somewhere they can hook-up with service providers, outreach workers, and medical assistance. Somewhere they can store their belongings, prepare healthy meals, network with others looking for work and housing. A campground would solve a host of problems from relieving health issues, providing safety and resources, to giving service providers a good central location to hook-up with those most in need of their services.

Background

Currently it is illegal to be homeless in Portland. The basic human necessities of living have been criminalized for nineteen years now. An anti-camping ordinance makes it illegal to sleep anywhere outside, including on public property. Loitering, trespassing, exclusions, and other laws are also being used to keep homeless people on the move. Yet, homeless people have nowhere else to go. Most homeless people in Portland originated from neighborhoods here and desire to remain here, near their family, friends, and other support networks. It is neither practical nor moral to expect homeless people to give up their communities and go elsewhere. Even if they could, other communities don't want homeless people either.

The numbers of homeless people, especially youth and families, has been growing despite the so-called economic boom. Businesses, property owners, and local police have been frustrated and overwhelmed by the problems homelessness poses for them. People sleep in doorways, under bridges and overpasses, hidden on porches and in backyards. Public restrooms are few and far between and are open for only limited hours, creating sanitation problems when homeless people are forced to use alleys and doorways for relieving themselves. Lack of protection from the weather and unsanitary conditions leads to disease and infections for homeless people, many of them without health

insurance to pay for care. Lack of access to storage facilities for clothes, medical and hygiene items and other belongings complicates the problems. A shortage of services such as shelters, medical services, showers, laundry facilities, clothing and food make daily survival for people without homes a difficult endeavor, at best.

Without stability, storage, sleeping and sanitation facilities, homeless people are unable to find and maintain employment, training, permanent housing, and the other things they require to get back on their feet. This catch-22 perpetuates the problems and is bad for everyone. To overcome the current crisis of homelessness we need to accept the premise that for every human being, we need to provide a basic minimal safety net for survival. Emergency shelter, restrooms, showers, laundry facilities, storage, phones and mail for employer and landlord contacts, food, and clothing. Without these, homeless persons cannot overcome their circumstances and get back on their feet.

This is not to say that camping should be our ideal for a bottom-line in housing. We are a wealthy nation and there is no reason why every American should not be able to have a decent, safe and warm home. But until we meet that goal, we need to stop criminalizing homeless people and start providing a place where they can legally and safely go to find--without a waiting list--without difficult obstacles or requirements--a safe and sanitary place to survive.

Some people will argue that a campground in the city of Portland is unsanitary and poses a health hazard to the greater community. The lack of sanitation facilities in public spaces is currently unsafe and is a health risk to everyone--homeless and housed alike. Being forced to defecate and urinate in public places for lack of facilities is dangerous to us all. A campground with porta-potties or 24-hour public restroom access is the solution.

Homeless people are often accused of being drunks, drug-addicts, and criminals. Anyone living in circumstances where their very lives are in immediate and constant danger--anyone dealing with survival--anyone living in a war zone -- would begin to steal, prostitute, or lie. Anyone dealing with survival in a war zone might become mentally unstable, depressed, develop serious anxieties, become violent, paranoid, or suicidal. Anyone dealing with survival in a war zone might be tempted to seek temporary solace by numbing their mind with alcohol or narcotics. Don't tell yourself lies. Living on the streets is dangerous and homeless people know it and feel it every second they are out there. Hitting the streets with nowhere to go is a violent traumatic event that just keeps on going--but unlike the energizer bunny, it's not pink, fuzzy, or cute. Despite these facts, most homeless people do not become criminals or drug or alcohol users. On the streets, integrity, dignity, privacy, and respect for one another are highly valued. People without this strength of character don't hit the streets--they commit suicide. Period.

The fact of the matter is homeless people are the constant and unprotected victims of crime. Drug dealers, sexual predators, thieves, and violent people prey on homeless people day in and day out. Violent, hate-filled punks troll skid row neighborhoods looking to beat up homeless people, set them on fire, and harass them for mere entertainment. The police seldom take these reports seriously, leaving homeless people to

fend for themselves. "Poverty pimps" offer exorbitantly overpriced flophouses for the night, check-cashing and loan shark businesses offer to relieve emergency financial problems for exorbitant fees, immoral landlords charge high application fees knowing full well they are going to turn down certain, if hopeful, renters. The police issue a constant barrage of "nuisance" tickets to homeless people in an attempt to harass homeless people to move on, using tactics to intimidate homeless people that violate the basic civil rights enjoyed by every other person in Portland. The pressure on homeless people is enormous. What crime, drug and alcohol use that is found in the homeless community should be no shock to anyone.