

Homeless Camp Focus Groups – Summary and Common Themes



The Columbus Coalition for the Homeless conducted six focus groups with residents of homeless encampments during August and September of 2019. The following is a summary of the results from all focus groups. General findings indicate that:

- Everyone prefers to live in housing, not in a homeless camp;
- Almost everyone wants help finding housing, jobs, and resources;
- Most people don't want to live alone or in high crime areas;
- Clean water, toilets, trash removal, and support services should be available for all of our citizens, even those who live in camps or on the street.

More specific responses are listed below.

Focus Groups Locations

- Dream Center
- Faith Mission
- Star House
- Jordan's Crossing
- The Open Shelter (2 groups)

Why do you live in a camp rather than a shelter?

- Did not feel safe in shelters – 4 comments
- Shelters were full – 2 comments
- More peaceful in a camp – 2 comments
- Theft in shelters – 2 comments
- Curfews / rules in shelters

How long have you lived in a camp?

- Less than 3 months – 6 responses
- 3 to 6 months – 3 responses
- 6 months to 1 year – 2 responses
- Longer than 1 year – 4 responses

How is living in a camp different from housing?

- Dirty / unsanitary conditions in camp – 4 comments
- Loud or inappropriate behavior by others in camp – 2 comments
- Housing is preferable, but without housing, camp is better than shelter
- Theft in camp
- It's depressing in a camp
- There's more privacy in a camp
- Less noise than apartment buildings in low income neighborhoods
- Less expensive in camp

Would you work with social service staff to find housing?

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- All participants were interested in working with social service staff
- Some social service providers don't follow through
- Many of the housing options offered have issues with noise and drugs

Would you prefer apartment or camp?

- All participants would prefer housing and its amenities over camp
- Do not want housing where I am alone or without others nearby
- Do not want housing in a bad neighborhood
- Housing makes it easier to get to work on time

What organizations help people in camps?

- Mount Carmel, Jordan's Crossing, Southeast, Star House, Maryhaven outreach, VA outreach, Church groups, PEER Center, Capital Crossroads
- Not all organizations have been helpful – some don't follow up, others suspected of revealing camp locations to city authorities

What did you do when offered assistance?

- Applied for housing – 2 comments
- Listened to advice from social worker / others – 2 comments
- Agreed to get help, but no follow-through

Have you lived in a camp that was destroyed? What was it like?

- Property destroyed or confiscated – 8 comments
- Lost everything they could not carry – 3 comments
- Loss of self-esteem / feeling worthless – 2 comments
- Told to leave right away
- Moved to another camp nearby

Did you lose possessions?

- Tents, clothes, sleeping bags, ID, birth certificates were lost
- Police sliced up tents

Did you receive notice before camp was destroyed?

- Written notice of camp destruction – 3 comments
- Verbal notice – 2 comments
- No notice – 2 comments

Did you get assistance when the camp was removed?

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- No assistance – 3 comments
- Have to do it yourself – 2 comments
- Mount Carmel helped
- Holy Family / Father Schweitzer helped

Should services and/or housing be made available immediately?

- Services should be available – nearly all participants
- You need to take care of it yourself – 2 comments
- People who are evicted or losing housing should also get help, not just people in camps

Would you be interested in sanctioned or established camps?

- Some were enthusiastic about improved facilities, Conestoga Wagons, etc.
- Others were not interested in camp life and wanted their own housing
- It's hard to maintain order and security in camps
- Drug and alcohol use in camps is a problem
- Those who felt improved camps would be beneficial wanted services attached

What services should be offered if established camps were permitted?

- Tents / tiny houses / Conestoga Wagons – 5 comments
- Improved facilities (electric, water, toilets) – 3 comments
- Healthcare / medication – 3 responses
- Food – 3 comments
- Camp rules and security to enforce rules – 2 comments
- Substance use services – 2 comments
- Mental health services – 2 comments
- Job / employment services – 2 comments
- Clothes – 2 comments
- Central facility for support services
- Locked storage
- Transportation to jobs and treatment
- Veterans services

What else should we know?

- Quality of staff doing outreach and follow-through is important – 3 comments
- Better transportation options are needed – 2 comments
- Substance use and recovery services are needed – 2 comments
- Safety and security are issues with camps – 2 comments
- Services on site at camps would be useful
- There are no beds available in shelters now
- People who live in camps have inner strength and gratitude to God
- No guns, no alcohol should be allowed in camps
- Assistance with personal development / self-esteem building would help

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- Improved facilities (water, toilet, showers, trash service) are needed at camps
- Wait lists make people lose hope / get depressed
- The Coalition should advocate for change

