



# **Surviving Homelessness: New Solutions for Living on the Land**

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## **Proposal to the City of Columbus**

**October 8, 2019**

### Executive Summary

The City of Columbus and Franklin County are at a crisis point with homelessness. More people are becoming homeless than ever before and there is not enough shelter space or affordable housing to meet their needs. The system is failing, with wait lists for shelter and more people sleeping on the street, in homeless camps, and other places not meant for human habitation.

In the midst of this crisis, the City of Columbus is once again demolishing homeless camps. Citing health and safety reasons, the city displaced at least 75 people in August and September of 2019. Camp residents were told to “call the homeless hotline” if they needed assistance with shelter, but the shelter system was over capacity at the time with wait lists for single adults. Outreach workers could not offer shelter or housing alternatives to people residing in the camps.

The Coalition believes that displacing people from homeless camps without offering appropriate shelter, housing, treatment, and support services is unacceptable. In light of the cruelty that is inherent in displacing people from homeless camps without appropriate alternatives, The Coalition proposes the following actions with the City of Columbus, Franklin County, and community partners:

1. No further demolition of homeless camps on public land without a coordinated effort with homeless service organizations to resolve problems and make appropriate shelter, housing, treatment, and support options available for camp residents;
2. Acceptance and support of a homeless camp pilot project with city water, trash removal, and other services for homeless camp residents left behind by the current system.

## Introduction

The community of people experiencing homelessness in Columbus, Ohio is diverse with experiences, preferences and needs. This report is intended as an overview of a subgroup within the overall homeless community: individuals experiencing homelessness who live in homeless encampments by choice or necessity.

The existence of homeless encampments demonstrates the need to consider how they may fit into a complete continuum of care in Columbus. A report by the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty reviews trends and themes pulled from one hundred homeless camps across the United States. This report explored common reasons one may live in a camp rather than accessing shelter<sup>1</sup> which include

- Insufficient affordable housing options
- Difficulty accessing shelter through single point of access
- Insufficient shelter beds, particularly outside of overflow months
- No shelters accessible to youth
- Safety concerns related to drug use, infestation, and violence in shelter
- Privacy and security concerns (i.e. lack of storage)
- Concerns about loss of autonomy in shelter

Individuals who have lived in camps and homeless advocates report concerns about the ways that camps are repeatedly destroyed at expense to the taxpayer, displacing the residents without new investment in resources to address the root of the issue.

Community members and local businesses often express concern about encampments citing liability concerns in the case of death or injury on private property, sanitation issues stemming from lack of restrooms and trash collection, and potential loss of profits<sup>2,3</sup>. Some of these concerns can be mitigated by providing public utilities and support services for homeless camps.

## Responses to Homeless Encampments

The responses to homeless encampments by other cities have ranged from permission and support to criminalization and destruction<sup>4</sup>. A majority<sup>5</sup> of responses across the country, including Columbus, have chosen to primarily use criminalization methods to attempt to manage the camps.

Many advocacy groups have tried to improve the Columbus community's response to working with homeless camp residents, with very limited success. Often identified as the most vulnerable and needy within the entire the homeless population, camp residents receive very few resources beyond "outreach" services. The Coalition has conducted meetings with City Council members, the Franklin

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<sup>1</sup> [https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WelcomeHome\\_TentCities.pdf](https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WelcomeHome_TentCities.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20171024/franklinton-business-owners-fed-up-with-homeless-camps>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20170503/franklinton-business-group-wants-homeless-camp-removed>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.startribune.com/role-of-police-questioned-in-homeless-camp-strategy/510975492/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/politics/2018/08/10/cincinnati-homeless-camp-residents-find-private-park-settle-now/955287002/>

County Continuum of Care, the Community Shelter Board and other groups over the past decade with little change in strategy or investment.

In Columbus, there is currently no sanctioned area for building and sustaining encampments. The experiences of individuals living in camps can vary, in large part due to the identity of the landowner: federal, county, or city. Historically, there have been camps along the river that were left undisturbed for a significant time. Development in the area (specifically the building of the new Veteran's Memorial) coincided with the same camps being displaced. Columbus also offers insufficient public restroom options, contributing to the collective concerns about sanitation and public health in camps.

Camp residents in Columbus report that the destruction and displacement (sometimes referred to as 'remediation') of camps is commonplace. Residents report that linkage to resources are usually offered as the camps are destroyed, though the resources offered are often insufficient to meet the needs of the newly displaced residents. Camp residents also share that there is a lack of transparency and consistency in policy when these displacements occur. They report that the eviction warnings, when posted, often have inaccurate dates. Residents report that their property is often destroyed or confiscated during the process. The slashing of tents and confiscation of other personal items can further set someone back on their path to stability as well as increase health and safety risk.<sup>6</sup>

Current policies and practices regarding homeless camps underemphasize autonomy, dignity and respect for individuals experiencing homelessness, and overemphasize removal and displacement. These policies have not reduced the number of people experiencing homelessness. Notably, the repeated displacement also makes it more difficult to get an accurate count of individuals experiencing homelessness as camp residents have reason to keep the location of their camps secret.

### Opportunity for New Solutions

Around Ohio, camp residents and advocates are pushing back against ineffective, criminalizing policies<sup>7,8</sup>, and the law is often on their side. Some federal courts have ruled to protect the rights of homeless individuals to camp when no viable alternative is available, invoking the First, Fourth, Fifth, Eighth, and Fourteenth Amendments; the rights of homeless individuals not to be deprived of their liberty or property without due process of law; the due process rights of homeless individuals to travel; and their rights to be free from cruel and unusual punishment.

There are multiple responses to consider that would be a more effective use of funds and less harmful than camp destruction and displacement. For example, the most common concerns reported about camps involve sanitation and safety. Instead of displacement, officials should consider short-term interventions such as temporary toilets, incentivizing trash pick-up by camp residents<sup>9</sup>, and increased security. When the complaint is from a business owner or other resident, mediation could be used to find further, mutually respectful solutions for all parties.

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<sup>6</sup> Focus groups conducted by Columbus Coalition for the Homeless, 2019

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.clevelandscene.com/scene-and-heard/archives/2018/06/14/aclu-of-ohio-northeast-ohio-coalition-for-the-homeless-and-others-implore-akron-planning-commission-to-protect-second-chance-village-homele>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dispatch.com/opinion/20190407/letter-give-homeless-options-before-bulldozing-camps>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20180701/litter-illegal-dumping-big-problems-franklinton-activists-say>

The Coalition has conducted significant study regarding the issue of homeless camps this year, including hosting six focus groups with camp residents, researching new models for homeless camps, and reviewing legal framework regarding the rights of people who are trying to survive homelessness outside of shelters. Materials from this study can be found on the Coalition's website at [www.columbushomeless.org/advocacy](http://www.columbushomeless.org/advocacy).

The Coalition asks the City of Columbus to embrace the growing trend toward sanctioned or semi-sanctioned encampments as a response to the problems outlined above. Semi-sanctioned camps are not officially recognized or condoned by the municipality but are also not actively sought out for removal either. Sanctioned camps include a degree of formal recognition by the relevant municipality and often include some funding, though not required. Ending destruction and displacement policies (decriminalizing) and moving toward sanctioning (legalizing) of camps will bring greater stability and consistency for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Below are some considerations for sanctioned or semi-sanctioned encampments. Planning for more sanctioned encampments should include campers themselves to ensure that the outcome is an encampment that will be used.

- Location: Sanctioned camps have been tried in a variety of types of locations, most often affiliated with a social service or religious institution with support and recognition from the local government.<sup>10,11</sup> Unsanctioned camps on private property offer an opportunity to allow for cities to try a new approach as enforcement options become limited after a camp is no longer on public property.
- Accommodations & Services: Agency-run encampments may offer resources such as regular health and wellness opportunities, meals, case management, and employment support. A centralized structure or hub for meeting and sharing resources can be a good option for engaging camp residents<sup>12</sup>. An established and maintained restroom reduces public health and sanitation concerns and meets a basic need for residents of the camp. Shower facilities are also important for camp residents to maintain dignity and normalcy, particularly while seeking employment or otherwise engaging with their community.
- Structure: Sanctioned camps often offer some structure intended to reduce health and safety risks of living outside. Raised platforms are useful to reduce damage from flooding<sup>13</sup>. Tiny houses and other creative options<sup>14,15</sup> provide insulation and a secure place to store belongings. Some structures have solar panels to provide electricity for lighting and comfort.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.oregonlive.com/health/2019/04/st-johns-church-offers-alternative-site-for-relocating-homeless-camp.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.journal-news.com/news/national/homeless-encampment-replaces-tents-with-tiny-houses/1617Oydl7US86AMr8dwnJO/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.wfaa.com/article/news/tiny-home-camp-for-homeless-veterans-begins-in-dallas/287-590906371>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.registerguard.com/article/20141209/NEWS/312099880>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.good-sam.com/our-stories/eugene-village-donors-homeless>

<sup>15</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/International/igloos-provide-shelter-homeless-population-france/story?id=53578058>

- **Governance:** An established and understood governance is crucial to setting and enforcing community rules and norms, any collection of rent or other fees, and interfacing with other community stakeholders when necessary. Camps range in types of governance. Some examples of sanctioned camps include rules enforced by police presence. Others may be self-governed with limited oversight by city officials. While safety of the residents should be a priority, increased oversight and security may result in fewer individuals choosing to access the camp.

### Conclusion and Next Steps

Columbus has an opportunity to explore creative solutions with the homeless community by acknowledging and embracing homeless encampments as a legitimate part of the continuum of care. The current policy of destroy-displace-repeat fails to address the root cause of homelessness and further destabilizes individuals within the camps. Now is the time to consider creative and bold short- and long term, housing-first solutions that prioritize a stable, consistent place to stay for every Columbus resident.

The Coalition proposes the following action steps:

1. No further demolition of homeless camps on public land without a coordinated effort with homeless service organizations to resolve problems and make appropriate shelter, housing, treatment, and support options available for camp residents;
2. Acceptance and support of a homeless camp pilot project with city water, trash removal, and other services for homeless camp residents left behind by the current system.

The Coalition will request a series of meetings with City Council, public entities, and other stakeholders to discuss these action steps and explore methods to achieve them.