



Talking Points on Homeless Encampments & Sweeps

March, 2016

ENCAMPMENTS

- Encampments are painful reminders of the persistence of dire poverty in the midst of plenty.
- Encampments are natural consequences of current public policy, which does not make enough housing available for very low-income people. This is systemic violation of human rights.
- Encampments illuminate problems in the shelter system, including insufficient capacity, restrictive and family-unfriendly policies, lack of privacy, violence, theft, conditions favorable to the spread of disease, and conditions unfavorable to the biological and psychological need to sleep. In most of the United States, there is little or no regulation of shelters. Avoiding the shelter system can be a reasonable choice.
- Encampments can create health problems: trash, spread of communicable disease due to poor hygiene and unsanitary conditions, discarded drug paraphernalia, interpersonal violence. Such problems can be mitigated by the provision of appropriate services (hygiene facilities, trash collection, needle exchanges, security arrangements) at encampments.
- Encampments can create opportunities for physical security, mutual support, democratic governance, and improved access to outreach workers and service providers.
- **Encampments and shelters are not housing, and can only be eliminated by the provision of actual housing**, with services when appropriate, as several of the recent homelessness emergency declarations have noted.

SWEEPS OF ENCAMPMENTS

- Some jurisdictions use orchestrated “sweeps” to remove people and things from encampment sites.
- Sweeps of encampments can destroy the tenuous stability that some people without homes are able to establish, and can entail loss of personal property, medications, food, clothing and important documents.

- Sweeps directly contradict the well-understood principles of trauma-informed care, and re-traumatize the people they forcibly displace, with potentially adverse mental health and behavioral consequences.
- Sweeps are expensive. When adding up the cost of law enforcement and sanitation department time, many cities are spending thousands of dollars a week, but if they don't provide adequate alternatives, they are doing nothing more than simply moving the problem around at tremendous taxpayer expense. Study after study has shown that communities actually save when they provide housing and social service response, rather than a criminal justice response, to homelessness.
- Sweeps are nonproductive unless alternative housing arrangements are provided; otherwise they simply push people from one place to another, to no end. If "sweeps" are ever employed, careful planning and collaboration, including with encampment residents, is required.

ALTERNATIVES TO ENCAMPMENTS AND SWEEPS ARE AVAILABLE. See

- National Health Care for the Homeless Council, [Homeless States of Emergency: Advocacy Strategies to Advance Permanent Solutions¹](#)
- United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, [Ending Homelessness for People Living in Encampments: Advancing the Dialogue²](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Jurisdictions should avoid destruction of encampments and instead focus on rapid creation of permanent, affordable housing and rapid re-housing of people living in encampments.**
2. As an interim measure, services should be provided at encampments to promote safe and hygienic living conditions.
3. As an interim measure, public buildings and facilities should be opened to provide shelter for people without homes.
4. A robust street outreach presence by health care workers and others should make services available to isolated individuals in need of care.

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¹ <https://www.nhchc.org/2016/02/new-publication-analyzes-homeless-states-of-emergency-declarations/>

² <https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/ending-homelessness-for-people-in-encampments/>