

A Perspective on Homeless Encampments

An Interview with Art Rios

By Barbara DiPietro

Art Rios is Regional Representative with the [National Consumer Advisory Board](#) (Regions 9 & 10), and is affiliated with [Central City Concern](#), an HCH program in Portland, Oregon. He has a personal experience of homelessness, and was a leader and organizer at two encampments: [Right to Dream Too](#) and [Dignity Village](#) where he helped make sure the camps were functioning on a day-to-day basis. He calls himself a Freelance Homeless Advocate and will advocate for anyone who has experienced homelessness and is still on the streets. Barbara DiPietro, Senior Director for Policy at NHCHC, recently asked Art about his thoughts on encampments and how we move forward with constructive solutions. Below is their discussion.



1. What are the positive aspects of living in an encampment? And what are some of the challenges of living in an encampment?

People are drawn to live in encampments because of the extra support from other peers, for the opportunity to be part of a community, and to experience a loyalty that is close to family. It's nice to have people to share your ups and downs—people going through the same thing as you.

The downside is sometimes you have a hard time getting motivated. Sometimes people get lazy and if the camp asks someone to do something (like chores), they don't want to. Sometimes people want the family and the community and all the good stuff, but sometimes when a campsite opens up, people then don't want to do it anymore.

2. What about encampments is most mis-understood by the general public?

I think NIMBY is the biggest challenge and they ask people to move away so they aren't seen any more, but they think we have somewhere to go when we don't. They think we're dirty or drug addicts and all those stigmas that people have about folks who are homeless. We're trying to make a community within a community.

3. What advocacy priorities do you think should be the focus for positive changes to occur?

There's a local group called [Harbor of Hope](#)—they are trying to open a shelter for people from encampments and I'm helping out with that because it's a good step forward. But we still need a policy to ensure safety for those still on the streets. Homelessness is still criminalized. People need a safe place to go. We need help writing a policy about rules for an encampment, and how the city can help establish services.

4. How do we balance supporting encampments in a healthy way but not take time and funding away from sustainable housing solutions?

We have all these social services agencies sitting around the table and it's a constant stream of recommendations, but it's just like anything else—budget cuts happen and then it falls apart. There's not a lot of talk about supporting the campsites, but rather supporting shelters. If we can get to a point where we can get permanent housing, there's still room for making an encampment better for people still living there and connecting them to services. And from there we can work on getting them into a housing unit. They are about to move more campsites—and people don't know where they are going to go. We can do both kinds of solutions at once.

5. Apart from advocacy, what's something tangible that individuals can do to better support people in encampments?

I always ask if people have land or if a church has land that we can put 3 or 4 tiny houses on the property. Can we get more people willing to help a few families live on a church parking lot, for example? It would be great to help changing campsites into mini-houses. Church properties seem to be good places for that.

6. Does the increased attention being paid to homelessness and encampments make you hopeful that things will get better, or do you have a different response?

In my eyes, it's getting worse because homelessness is still criminalized and the stigma of being a drug addict is still there everywhere you go. Cops still stop you a lot for no reason. There's still sweeps—camps are being broken up so people are further away from services and that makes it harder to get help. If you stay near services, it's harder to avoid getting swept up. A new task force here is clearing the downtown area before the Cinco de Mayo celebration—so that's not helpful. Will it get better? I don't know—they are talking about starting a 24-hour/365-day shelter, but we don't see supportive housing money coming soon enough.

7. What advice do you have for the HCH community about how they can best support people in encampments?

I think we have an opportunity to go to campsites and do backpack medicine, mental health and addiction work. We need outreach teams to find folks who are too scared to go to a hospital or clinic, and help provide education and services. Do some small assessments, talk to someone—people who have had a mental breakdown might be okay talking with someone from the behavioral health units we have. It's also getting people to recognize there are places that care about people who are homeless and know how to care for them.

We also need to let the government know we still have a lot of people who aren't getting treatment in a hospital or an ER or a clinic. We always hear about the frequent users—those people who go to the hospital or the ER a lot and cost a lot of money—but what about those people who didn't go? It's about getting an organizational outreach in our community to safely serve them outside the clinic. There's three positions that work great together: a peer outreach worker, a mental health counselor, and a primary care provider. The HCH community understands that people self-medicate and may not come to the clinic—we need their help out here.

8. Is there anything else you'd like *Mobilizer* readers to know?

I wish people could change their perspectives on how they look at campsites—these are just regular human beings coming together. We want some rules and we want to work with the city to make this a safe place for people to come and sleep. We would like to police ourselves and have an opportunity for someone to feel like they belong in a community.