

CAMP OUTREACH & REFERRAL SERVICES VS. CAMP ABATEMENT



Anchorage Houseless Resources Advocacy Council

Testimony before the Municipality of Anchorage Assembly Committee on Homelessness

June 17, 2020

Honorable Chairperson, Members of the Committee

Good morning, my name is Holly Cannon and I was once a houseless person.

Thank you for inviting us to share HRAC'S perspectives on the Municipality's programs of Camp Outreach and Camp Abatement. We appreciate your efforts to protect houseless individuals and families from the ravages of COVID-19.

With a little more effort, we believe the Municipality can bring a similar degree of concern to the plight of our campers.

We are submitting our testimony in writing due to the challenges we confront with your virtual meeting format. We are ready to respond to any questions you may have (assuming we have a connection that works.)

OUR HOUSELESS RESOURCES ADVOCACY COUNCIL

- HRAC is in a constant state of renewal and discovery.
- All of our voting members are, or have been, houseless.
- HRAC strives to be...
 - The voice that has not been heard in the past for all those communities we serve,
 - A safe space for houseless people to unpack their trauma & share their joys, concerns, hopes, & needs,
 - A bridge over the chasm separating the houseless and the housed,
 - A forum for houseless and formerly houseless individuals to meet housed individuals in the middle where we can seek reconciliation and build a common understanding of the problem while working together toward solutions that will mend our tattered safety nets.

We believe that intersectional conversations concerning our common and shared feelings of alienation may take us on a path toward reconciliation and healing some of society's wounds.

OUR HRAC CAMP OUTREACH EFFORTS

- Members of HRAC were actively engaged with last year's Camp Occupy. **During Camp Occupy we witnessed grass roots democracy in action with daily talking circles managing camp affairs, sharing deeply personal concerns, and policing member behavior.**



Camp Occupy 2019 Talking Circle – self-governance/ democracy in action

- We have been reaching out to several camps over the course of this Winter and Spring delivering food and clothing as we are able to acquire it.
- Since COVID-19 we have continued to maintain contact with several camps, distributing masks and advice on how to stay healthy.
- Our visits to the Third Avenue camp were probably the most troublesome, but not unique.
 - We would provide masks and encourage their use, but none would be seen on our next visit.
 - We would tell the campers that the City was serious about clearing the area and that they should seek shelter elsewhere.
 - **Very few of the Third Street campers that we encountered were good candidates for the Municipality's shelters,**
 - Most of them had behavioral or mental health problems that would not be acceptable in the shelter environment and
 - Many of them cannot tolerate being "herded into corrals" (*ie* communal shelter life)
 - Most of them were not ready to enter programs that might help them manage their problems.
- **We are certain your camp abatement teams will encounter many of these campers over and over again as they are forced to move time and time again across Anchorage.**

OUTREACH AND REFERRAL EFFORTS

- **Connecting houseless individuals with services tailored to their individual needs so they can secure housing is a critical first step** in transitioning from camp to home.



Holly & Jonathon—no longer houseless!

- **Some of us are no longer houseless because compassionate, effective Outreach was the first step in our journey to recovery and to becoming established members of the larger community.**
- We appreciate the fact that your COVID-19 Response plans included a robust Outreach and Referral component.
 - More than 400 houseless folks have been housed during your COVID-19 Response initiative – that is great news, though we do not know of one that was not in a shelter
- **But the COVID-19 Outreach effort to serve campers has been nearly nonexistent.**
 - MIT redirected its priorities in January and has not been providing Outreach.
 - Efforts to get other agencies involved were pretty much unsuccessful.
 - We are told that the delays relate to the liability associated with exposing employees to COVID-19
 - **We only know of one Outreach worker in the field during the first week of June, while well staffed abatement efforts were taking place all around him.**
- We are pleased that the Municipality issued a Request for Grant Proposals for Outreach/Referral Services pilot program from 7/1-12/31/20
 - Hopefully the work performed under this \$183,000 grant will lead to a “robust” program that will continue for as long as we have campers.
 - **HRAC would like to collaborate with the agency that receives the grant and we hope that there will be an opportunity to do so.**
- Due on June 11th, **the deadline for submitting the Outreach grant proposal fell after Camp Abatement was nearly complete** along Chester Creek, Campbell Creek Park and Mountain View Lions Park – that’s almost like relocating underground utilities a week after the street was paved, but we are talking about relocating human beings.

CAMPS

- We understand that neighborhoods do not want campers adjacent to their property.
- We know that campers cannot expect to be welcome on private property.
- **We know there will always be campers who can’t deal with communal shelter living.**
- **We believe strongly that the Municipality must provide a safe space on public property for sanctioned camping and tiny homes. We recommend that you do so as soon as possible, before Anchorage’s newly evicted houseless folks join us on the streets.**
 - Here is a link to King County’s Sanctioned Encampment [Check List](#).
 - King County is also home to Tiny Home villages that accommodate houseless folk.



CAMP ABATEMENT

- We understand the political necessity for camp abatement.
- **But it is wrong to justify camp abatement on the basis of the availability of shelter beds when your shelters are not prepared to accommodate campers with untreated mental or behavioral health issues.**
- **We strongly oppose the execution of camp abatement orders in the absence of effective Outreach & Referral services.**
- It is just wrong to force campers out of camps when no alternatives exist that can meet their immediate needs and then force them to move repeatedly over the course of the year -- year after year. This treatment of campers mirrors a desire in our society to just have the houseless disappear.
- We acknowledge that the Municipality has devoted a lot of resources to your COVID-19 Emergency Shelter programs, but that does not really excuse the fact that **the Municipality is not in compliance with the Federal Center for Disease Control’s specific COVID-19 guidance** recommending that
 - Camps be left in place
 - COVID-19 social distancing & personal hygiene practices be implemented and enforced in those camps.

ALCOHOL TAX REVENUE:

- We understand that the Assembly will be besieged with high priority projects backed by vocal constituencies.
- HRAC's constituents are neither well connected, nor property owners, nor formally organized, but their voices need to be heard and we appreciate your invitation to speak on their behalf.
- **On behalf of all of Anchorage's houseless families and individuals, we urge you to reserve a significant portion of this new source of revenue to strengthen and redesign services such as a 72-hour detox center & rehabilitation services, social, behavioral, mental health, and job skills training, as well as low impact options to camp abatement. These financially starved services are critical components of our collaborative effort to make being houseless a brief one-time thing.**

In conclusion, we urge you to

- Suspend Camp Abatements until your Outreach & Referral program is fully operational,
- Provide for supervised camping and tiny homes, and
- Devote a significant portion of the Alcohol Tax to fund desperately needed human services.

Thank you for letting us voice our concerns and the concerns of those we serve.

