

Director's Desk: Police sweep of new self-governed camp is opportunity lost

Feb. 2nd, 2018

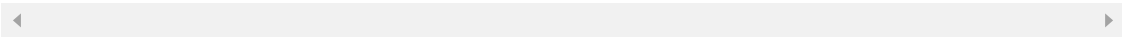
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First, they hauled away bag upon bag of garbage. Then, in small clearings, they pitched 10 green tents on platforms atop cement pier blocks. Next, they scattered bark dust on existing paths, determined to leave a light footprint. The underbrush, the downed branches; all was left in place.

On Jan. 28, this group of people experiencing homelessness organized with a coalition to launch Village of Hope, a new self-governed encampment. It's located along Northeast Airport Way in the Big Four Corners Natural Area, managed by Portland Parks and Recreation.

Less than a week later, on Feb. 2, Portland Police officers cordoned off the Village of Hope with police tape, working with park rangers and Rapid Response workers to force all campers to leave.

Campers told Street Roots it was not the first time they'd been forced to leave the premises.



A bit of background: Organizers with Right 2 Survive and Advocacy 5 teamed up with Anawim Christian Community, which was working with homeless folks in outer Northeast Portland who are frequently displaced by the dozens of “camp cleanups” the city of Portland contracts each week. Village of Hope was launched the same week the city contracted 49 campsites to be “cleaned.”

People must continually move elsewhere.

A number of people already camping along the Columbia Slough had been displaced repeatedly by these camp sweeps, and they were isolated in the woods without access to trash disposal. At best, they could haul trash on their bikes or with shopping carts.

Steve Kimes, a pastor with Anawim Christian Community Church — who is acting along with Ibrahim Mubarak of Right 2 Survive and Lisa Lake of Advocacy 5 as the on-site oversight committee — emphasized that Village of Hope was “not pulling people and saying go ahead and move here. We’re taking people who are already here and saying, ‘Let’s have a clean village. Let’s have an organized one. Let’s have a secure one. Let’s protect the businesses. Let’s protect the environment.’”

One of the people who has lived in this park over the past year is Kerry Wheeler, now one of the “Houseless Managers” at Village of Hope. She camped with 11 other people for nine months, she said, until she was forced to move this autumn. She estimates she was swept eight more times during the past two months.

Until Friday morning, she was enthusiastic about being part of an organized effort; one that meant she would be involved in ecological care.

“We are going to have environmentalists explain things a little bit better,” she said. “And I would love to volunteer time to plant yearlings and give back.”

As a city, we are caught up in a cycle of camp displacements, exacerbating trauma and further isolating people who are already vulnerable.

Rather than continuously throwing public funds at moving our homeless neighbors out of public parks and other natural areas, why not involve them in the ecological care of the land on which they camp?

How might people targeted by these displacements instead be engaged in solutions themselves, given tools to clean spaces and take care of the land?

Lisa Fay, board chair of Right 2 Survive, said, “Instead of people complaining about houseless people being in natural spaces, why not create a stewardship program where they become the ambassadors of an area?”

Commissioner Amanda Fritz is in charge of Portland Parks and Recreation, and her initial response was understandable. She wanted to protect the park, and connect homeless folks to services.

In her statement released Jan. 29, she stated the Big Four Corners Natural Area, which is a sensitive wetland habitat, is “not an appropriate place to house people.”

Yet because we don’t have enough affordable housing, we don’t have enough shelter space and shelters do not work for everyone, people will continue to camp

in places that seem inappropriate in one way or another.

Fritz is committed to addressing homelessness, and she has long been open to creative solutions that include the leadership of people experiencing homelessness, such as her support in finding a site for Right 2 Dream Too.

So I wonder if Fritz might take a second look at the Village of Hope, and return to the intriguing question that Village of Hope highlights: How might people who are homeless be involved in the ecological work of our land where they camp?

Could campers at Village of Hope be allowed to return and work with park rangers? Could they be elevated into environmental stewards and given the tools to do this?

In October, natural resource managers from around the Pacific Northwest met with environmental and homeless advocates to find ways to collaborate on compassionate solutions to the impacts of homelessness on public lands and in outdoor recreation areas.

Kathleen Guillozet, director of the Willamette Model Watershed Program, helped to facilitate that meeting of minds and has been seeking to provide natural resources professionals with trainings that better equip them for the social dimensions of their work.

“If we are accepting the tough reality that people are going to need to shelter outside for the foreseeable future, I think it’s fair to say that sweeps are really not the great answer,” Guillozet said. “What comes after that is the huge question mark. That’s a really uncomfortable place for natural resource managers and many members of the public. We don’t have good models to look to.”

Guillozet wonders whether Village of Hope offers an opportunity.

“Can we figure out how to sanction different kinds of villages without compromising larger agency and public values, so we can test new compassionate pathways that give the park staff some leeway to engage in ways that have been so hard in the past?” she asked.

But the bigger questions remain: How can we honor the fact that people in poverty are whole and deserving? That they are capable of leadership?

Village of Hope is just one effort among many.

The Multnomah County Board of Commissioners voted to fund a shelter on Southeast 61st Avenue and Southeast Foster Road that aims to support couples and people with pets, hopefully transitioning people to more permanent housing.

In other words, we have to act again and again, and so do elected officials.

So when homeless neighbors are proposing creative solutions, let's listen.

"I pray that they are going to let us be," said Kerry Wheeler, standing next to her tent in her pink coat, her dog Baila next to her on a leash.

"Give us one chance to show we can do this properly. We are going to make it our everything to make that happen."

The online version of this week's Director's Desk was updated to reflect the Feb. 2 sweep of Village of Hope.

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