

Back in late January, I witnessed for the first time a "sweep" of a homeless encampment near my house. Over the previous three or so weeks, I'd gotten to know some of my houseless neighbors via outreach that the Sunnyside Neighborhood Association began with the help of Street Roots in late December. I began running the shower program at the Sunnyside Methodist Church in January and, since I scheduled many of these folks for weekly showers, I got to know their names and a little bit about their backgrounds. I was impressed that they were conscientious about wearing masks—even outside—and always thanked us profusely the showers. I joked around with Mark, a sweet guy in his late 50s who is always ready with a joke and a kind word. I met Kelly, who I'd regularly see sweeping the sidewalk near her tent and picking up trash along 35th Ave. And I met Scotty, who had a memorial to his wife beside his tent on Yamhill. (In 2019, after they returned to their spot after running errands, they found their tent had been swept and all her seizure medication gone along with it. She had had a seizure later that day and, unable to get her medicine in time, died.)

So when Rapid Response, the company contracted by the City to do these "clean-ups" of encampments, turned up to tell these folks that they'd have to move their tents and belongings, I was upset. Even with a few days advance warning, the sweep of a houseless community is destructive and unfair. The tactics of Rapid Response were not cruel this time. They went around with trash bags and candy bars asking folks how they could help them pack up. But when campers asked, "But where can I move to?" the Rapid Response team had no answers. "Just not here," was basically their reply.

When there aren't enough shelter beds or affordable housing units in the city of Portland, and when sweeps happen with great regularity, that is not an adequate answer. Not by a long shot.

On the last day of the sweep at Sunnyside Park, Kelly finally decided she would muster her strength and pack up her belongings and move over to Laurelhurst Park (which is, ironically, where she'd been living before the sweep at Laurelhurst Park in November). I'm not embarrassed to admit that a friend and I helped her. My friend drove her over to Laurelhurst, both fully masked of course, and we helped her reconfigure her platform with the pallets and helped her erect her tents (one for herself, one for her son). As I got on my bike to head home, Kelly looked up from her tent, where she was unpacking her trash bags full of clothes and other belongings, looked me in the eyes and said, "Thank you, so much, Hannah."

I stopped at a friend's house on the way home and as I was telling him what just happened, I started to cry. "Do you need a hug?" was all the further invitation I needed to start bawling my eyes out. I suddenly realized that I'd been keeping up a cheerful front to

be useful and helpful to these houseless folks (who, after all, are used to this sort of treatment) and that I just couldn't understand how the city would allow this to be its official policy. What do people like Kelly do who don't have neighborhood advocates with trucks to help them pack up their belongings? What kind of life is it to be pushed back and forth from one park to the other--knowing that many of your neighbors call the cops on you and your friends to complain on a daily basis? (Even when, like Kelly, you are trying your best to keep your camp and your fellow campers' areas clean.)

On that day, it felt like an unwinnable battle. I know that's how the houseless folk feel every day, living in fear that they'll come back from an errand or a doctor's appointment to find their tent and all their earthly belongings gone. Or not leaving their tent—even for lunch—in fear that if they do, someone will take it.

This is why I strongly support Representative Winsvey Ocampo's HB 2367. Until the state of Oregon can supply WAY more affordable housing, more sanctioned camps, and more shelters (last resort, since shelters are too risky during a pandemic) in Oregon, we cannot force campers out of public spaces. It's just not humane. The right to rest is a basic human and civic right for all people. Punishing people who are experiencing houselessness is not an effective solution, and it creates more barriers on a homeless person's eventual pathway to stability.

Thank you for your support of this important bill.

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