



"Pastor" Mike Davis talks with people in East Portland where he has made it a second career to extend outreach and assistance to people experiencing homelessness.

PHOTO BY ADRIENNE BARNETT

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Oregon Department of Transportation and Multnomah County, have made his job harder than usual. While these new strategies aim to help reduce the visible impact of homelessness in the community, Davis and others find the agencies' initiatives missing the target and instead impeding the real solutions to the multifaceted problem.

While routine camp clean-ups by authorities are commonplace to most homeless populations, Oregon Department of Transportation's sweep this past October shook up the Southeast homeless community more than usual. Evicting around 30 people from a sizeable camp between Johnson Creek and I-205 (and taking the majority of their tents and tarps), ODOT officials said the camp's occupants had been contributing to serious environmental degradation along the creek.

"People had been using the creek as a toilet and washing area, and had created dams harmful to the stream's integrity," says ODOT spokesperson Don Hamilton. "The state has put a lot of money in it to help restore the salmon habitat there, and it has continued to get worse. We had to do something."

While its intentions may have been well founded, the sweep scattered the camp residents across the surrounding area, some without the gear they left behind. One of the residents of the camp died four days after the October sweep, and his friends claim he suffered a severe emotional impact from the loss of his camping gear days before. Now, those displaced from the camp remain unadjusted and upset by the jolting move.

Many of these campers spend cold mornings at the Clackamas Service Center, a house converted to a community center on 82nd Avenue, walking distance from the Springwater Corridor. The center provides warm food, clothes and biweekly medical aide from an Outside In clinic van, and remains the only hub in miles offering homeless aid to the growing displaced

community.

Davis usually starts his days at the center, checking in with folks and learning about new changes in camp setups and pending legal issues. While not at the Johnson Creek Camp during the major sweep, Davis has been involved in the legal repercussions following the event. This morning, he sits down next to Hilary, a former occupant of the Johnson Creek camp, to catch up.

"My husband and I are by ourselves now," says Hilary, sipping from a steaming mug of coffee at the communal breakfast table.

"Our community is split up, but it's easier not to be disturbed this way. We don't have much left and we don't want to lose it again."

Hilary's husband is one of the five members of the Johnson Creek camp to file a federal lawsuit against ODOT, claiming the state agency failed to follow its own policy for removing and storing personal property from camps for up to 30 days.

"Sleeping bags, tarps, tents — they threw it all away that day," says Hilary, still fuming from the memory. "They could care less about our stuff. But it's all we had."

Davis says the lawsuit could take years to process, which could weaken the eventual outcome. For now, he's more concerned about the continuing efforts by ODOT, county and city officials along the corridor.

"See over here," Davis says, pointing to a freshly sheared grassy clearing along the Springwater Corridor, near the center. "This used to be full of native brush and trees. But ODOT hired a company to clear it out after they saw people camping here."

In the distance, an orange tree-trimming truck is working its way along a stretch of the path.

"This has become more common since I've been coming out here," says Davis. "They're cutting down the trees to expose camping areas — but they don't provide

alternatives. It just keeps pushing these camps elsewhere."

One of these cleared areas used to be Davis' own living site before he moved into a home. Walking through the now-empty grounds, he recalls a time when interacting with visiting authorities was far less threatening.

"I wouldn't say their presence has increased, but they've become more and more unrelenting since I was a part of these camps," he says. "It's frightening, to be honest."

"Most people can't find a way to get downtown for a doctor's appointment or employment help. And there's the risk that if they do leave, their home will be destroyed."

PASTOR MIKE DAVIS

By now, Davis says he knows which cops sincerely care about the community's well-being versus those rooting for arrests.

"I've seen a cop car drive down the bike path at night, pulling over at any sign of a camp and arresting each occupant," he says, shaking his head. "This isn't how it's supposed to work. How is this helping?"

The Portland Police Bureau recently publicized its efforts to address homelessness. Police Chief Mike Reese says the new strategy, dubbed "Prosper Portland," will help businesses and agencies better coordinate their efforts to address homelessness — within downtown Portland's small radius.

But according to a 2013 survey conducted by the Portland Housing Bureau and Multnomah County, 51 percent of all 2,869 homeless people surveyed live in East Portland, with the majority in Southeast. Downtown Portland is home to 28 percent.

This selective focus has riled up many East Portland representatives, including Lents Neighborhood Association Chairman Jesse Cornett. In a heated letter to Reese, in response to the Prosper Portland pitch, Cornett criticized the plan as catering only to downtown businesses concerns.

Cornett, who works downtown, says that despite having compassionate officers in Portland, "when you have the chief working

downtown with the business alliance, there's something wrong."

In October, while ODOT was clearing the Johnson Creek camp, a large media spotlight remained on the potential move of downtown's Right 2 Dream Too camp, keeping the ODOT sweep largely out of the public eye. Cornett blames this solely on the locale — there are fewer business and neighbors affected by the East Portland campers — so fewer people want to hear about it.

"You can't ignore what's happening along the Springwater trail," Cornett says. "The more people you bump from downtown, the more people end up in Southeast."

The main problem, Cornett says, is that no one is talking about solutions.

"Sure, you can keep waking up people so there's no conflict with business owners downtown, but then what? Someone has to be a voice at the state level talking about reducing poverty to make a real change," he says.

Davis echoes Cornett's concerns, adding that the majority of Portland's great homeless resources are downtown — more than an hour's bus ride from the Springwater camp areas.

"Most people can't find a way to get downtown for a doctor's appointment or employment help," Davis says. "And there's the risk that if they do leave, their home will be destroyed."

A few camps are taking matters into their own hands, revving up efforts to remain largely unaffected by the authorities' ramped-up interactions and neighbor's complaints. Their secret? Camouflage.

"Lumpy" has been living in the Johnson Creek neighborhood all of his life. And he has no intention on leaving anytime soon. His current camp, buried deep into an unassuming forested area, is now home to eleven, including a woman six months pregnant. With a solidly-structured recycling and waste system and a pair of canine companions that serve as lookouts, the small campsite is anything but disorderly.

"That's where I'm staying now," Lumpy says, pointing to what looks like an unremarkable growth of underbrush. To the expert eye, it's a smartly disguised tent. Further up the small path, tan tarps with wind slits drape the tree line, quietly camouflaging another cluster of tents.

"I'm sure a few cops know we're out here," he says, with a shrug. "But we clean up after ourselves aren't in anyone's way — like the camps on the corridor. This is home, and we treat it like that."

Davis' last stop of the day is not on his usual route — but a friend at the Clackamas Service Center suggested he swing by. "ODOT's been there," he told Davis.

As Davis turns the corner in an East Portland neighborhood to an open lot, he brings the car to a slow roll.

"Wow."

The area — once green with trees and long grasses — has clearly been recently hacked to the ground, exposing raw roots and stumps through the freshly trodden ground. A few reminders of the camp once tucked behind the lot's greenery are left exposed in the mud: A boot, a flashlight, a shredded tarp.

"This just happened. I swear I was just here last month, visiting these folks," Davis says, eyes fixated on the desolate grounds.

As the increased spattering of snow begins to gather on his windshield, Davis' hands tighten on the steering wheel.

"You know, when you're out here, you don't have a timeline. You don't know when you're going to lose your only possessions. When you're going to be woken up in the middle of the night by the cops. You don't know when it's going to end," he says. "Trust is hanging by a thread."



Dignity



Poverty