

A new camp in North Portland fights for survival

BY VAHID BROWN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

On October 7th, the city of Portland announced a housing state of emergency and took a few small steps toward addressing the housing crisis. There is perhaps no better illustration of this emergency than the tent encampment at the strip of land between Greeley and Interstate in North Portland.

There, people with employment, with incomes, with college classes to attend, with disabilities and pregnancies and hopes and dreams, are simply unable to afford Portland rents or are waiting to be moved up on affordable housing waitlists. So they are doing the best they can with one another, sharing that space in tents. Yet the day before the city made this declaration, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) posted "no camping" notices on land it owns there with threats to impound any property not removed from the premises before October 24th.

The day after the emergency declaration, Union Pacific Railroad police gave campers on the portions of that strip owned by the railroad a 48 hour notice to get lost or lose everything.

The city of Portland, which also owns some of this land, relented this week and said that it will not perform a similar sweep of the Greeley campers on city property, but the promised garbage and portable toilet services have yet to be delivered.

Elsewhere in Portland, the city continues to routinely sweep homeless people sheltering on public land. This practice is deeply harmful to our most vulnerable community members and it needs to stop. Pushing the homeless from place to place, impounding their few and often critical belongings again and again, is tantamount to the criminalization of their lack of shelter.

Getting to know the campers at North Greeley these past few weeks has been a genuine pleasure, but their stories of life outside in Portland are profoundly upsetting. One of the first people I met told me he had been through over thirty sweeps in his time on the streets here. I helped him through yet another one at the end of last week, as he, his fiancé, and his parents-in-law were all staying in a camper trailer on Union Pacific land along Greeley and were told they had to go. If I hadn't helped along with other concerned community members, moved their trailer to a sympathetic church's parking lot, this family would have lost



the little shelter it had and been rendered even more homeless, and become a greater burden on public resources.

Another group that I helped move from Union Pacific to city property at Greeley told me they'd been swept every three days for the past month. Imagine these three men – including a disabled veteran, a college student and two Street Roots vendors – trying to gather the resources to get off the street while having to pack up and move everything they own every few nights.

Dee, another young man camping on city land at Greeley, told me he is on the waiting list for housing through Transition Projects and Central City Concern, but that it will be four to six months before they can get him inside. He has done what he can, the available resources in this city are doing what they can for him and he has no choice in the meantime but to find the safest possible shelter outside. For now, that's the Greeley Camp. To sweep Dee would be to punish this young man for the city's lack of affordable and transitional housing. This is unacceptable.

The city has taken the right step in declaring an emergency and I commend Mayor Hales' office for allowing the Greeley campers on Portland public land some respite from the sweeps.

But elsewhere in Portland there is no such respite, and

public land under the jurisdiction of other agencies such as the Oregon Department of Transportation is also being subject to routine sweeps. Sweeps kill. Winter is coming, and a sweep can often mean losing items like documents, prescriptions, and cold weather sleeping gear that are critical for survival on the streets.

The city should move to identify areas of city property, like the strip at Greeley, where people can take temporary shelter. The Portland Parks Bureau should not be subjecting people sleeping in the parks to sweeps, as is now a daily occurrence. The city should communicate with ODOT and similar agencies in ways that reflect recognition of the state of emergency and toward finding alternatives to sweeps. The declaration of emergency is just the beginning, and it will take time for the City to use its new powers on zoning to free up new shelter space. In the meantime there are people who have no other option than to shelter outside. Needing to sleep is not a crime. It is a basic requirement for life. The policy of sweeps is inhumane and it only makes the problem worse. We need to do better.

Vahid Brown is a historian, community activist, and advocate for the houseless. He is a PhD candidate at Princeton University. The North Portland camp has set up a GoFundMe called Support Greeley Homeless Camp.



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