

# Trash collectors

People on and off the streets are working together to address a universal problem: garbage

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During the spring and summer last year, Gilligan, a 40-year-old homeless man who lives in the Parkrose neighborhood along the Columbia Slough, took handfuls of garbage bags to the homeless camps throughout the Parkrose neighborhood.

While handing the bags out, he and other volunteers reminded the campers that their garbage had to be bagged and taken to designated drop-off areas by the next day. On Friday mornings, inmate work crews from Multnomah County Inverness Jail collected the bags and took them away.

The ad-hoc garbage collection service was the brainchild of the Historic Parkrose Prosperity Initiative, a neighborhood nonprofit focused on economic equity. The program was quickly effective – the camps in Parkrose were noticeably cleaner.

"It made a big difference in how we lived," Gilligan said.

Garbage is inextricably connected to homeless camps. Unfortunately, trash near camps adds to the stigmatization of homeless people and can perpetuate the idea that homeless people and camps are unsafe.

As Portland's shortage of affordable housing and housing crisis continues – with no apparent end in sight – homeless camps will continue to exist in large numbers. There is a growing desire among policy makers, neighborhoods and grassroots organizations to make those camps more livable – which involves cleaning up the garbage.

When the numbers of homeless people camping along the Springwater Corridor Trail last year swelled to the hundreds, the issue of garbage became more urgent. Then Mayor Charlie Hales placed porta-potties and dumpsters along the trail.

Most of them were removed after the mass sweep in September, but the city continues to collect garbage from 12 dumpsters and cans placed under the Steel Bridge, along the Springwater Corridor, and near Hazelnut Grove, a homeless village in the Overlook neighborhood.

It's the first time there has been a dedicated effort to collect garbage from homeless camps and provide dumpsters.

For people who live in homes, getting rid of garbage is easy, a weekly ritual for Portlanders: the trash is bagged, put out in a trash can and the can is emptied once a week by garbage collection services.

But people without an address do not have that option, and in many cases it can be illegal for people to throw their garbage away in a privately owned garbage can. If a garbage can is on a public sidewalk or right of way – the night before collection, for instance – a person can put their trash in it. But if the can is on private property, a

person would be trespassing if he or she attempted to put their garbage there.

"It's not a lifestyle choice," Mingus Mapps, the director of the Parkrose Historic District, said, speaking of the amount of trash that can exist near camps. "It's an infrastructure failure."

Parkrose's garbage collection service is the brainchild of Mapps, who came up with the idea after three listening sessions about homelessness that the Parkrose Historic District helped convene last spring. One session was with the business community, another with the neighborhood association, and the third with the neighborhood's homeless community.

One issue came up over and over again: trash.

"That is one of the biggest issues, is garbage," Gilligan said.

The existence of trash at a camp, Gilligan and others said, can make camps unsafe and unhealthy places to live. Rats and other vermin can be attracted to the area. "It's demoralizing," Mapps said.

"Homeless people don't want to live in filth," Gilligan said. "But we don't have an option (for how to get rid of garbage)."

The neighborhood's garbage collection service started fairly easily: Mapps worked with local businesses to donate garbage bags, and he worked with Gilligan and other people experiencing homelessness who volunteered to distribute the garbage bags to the neighborhood's camps. Mapps guesses that there are between 20 and 25 camps in the neighborhood, mostly along the Columbia Slough.

The entire program, including collection services done by inmate work crews from Inverness Jail, cost nothing.

"That's just five or six entities working together," Mapps said.

But the program fell apart six months later after a number of the camps – including Gilligan's was swept by the Portland Police.

*(Editor's note: Gilligan was also featured this week in the July 25 Willamette Week after security forces hired by the city threw away his belongings in violation of the city's contractual agreement for camp sweeps. Read more on that issue at [www.wweek.com](http://www.wweek.com).)*

"Our partners kind of disappeared on us," Mapps said.

He would like to re-start the program again, which depends almost entirely, he said, on re-establishing the relationships with the people who live in Parkrose and finding out where they are.

Brian Slack visits dozens of homeless camps each week. He never knows what he will find when he jumps out of his truck and picks up the blue garbage bags he left with campers the last time he saw them.

As a crew leader of the Clean Start PDX program, Slack helps provide garbage collection services to nearly 50 camps

through Southeast, Northeast and North Portland. The program also cleans up the garbage left at camps that have been abandoned or swept by the police.

The program started about a year ago and is operated by Central City Concern, one of the city's largest social-service agencies that, in part, designs programs that provide homeless people with jobs.

The Clean Start PDX program is funded by One Point of Contact, the new city program that oversees camp sweeps and clean ups. The Joint Office of Homeless Services also contributes funding. It's a separate program from Clean & Safe, the Portland Business Alliance-funded program that cleans up a 213-block area of downtown Portland.

Clean Start PDX is made up of three two-person crews, consisting of people who have experienced homelessness the past, that visit camps each day to collect garbage. The garbage is then taken to Stanton Yard, the city's trash dump in inner northeast Portland.

The program provides the camps with blue bags, and Jay McIntyre, the program's manager, said that Slack and his co-workers only pick up those bags, so a person's personal belongings are not taken away.

The crews visit the camps at least once or twice a week. Slack said that he will make two trips to Stanton Yard on any given day.

The number of bags Slack and his co-workers collect number in the thousands. According to data collected by the program, almost 22,000 bags of trash have been collected, and 7,800 needles have been disposed of (whether used for opiate use or to treat diabetes or other health conditions, McIntyre was unable to say). "It's a huge amount," McIntyre said.

Slack takes before-and-after pictures of every clean-up that he does. The difference between a camp before a clean up and after a clean up is like comparing night and day.

The clean-ups and garbage collection of the camps makes them more livable, McIntyre said, and also decreases the chance that the city will receive complaints about them and subsequently

issue orders for the camps to be swept.

"The city is very complaint driven," McIntyre said, adding that the crews are trained to talk to campers about the effects removing garbage can have on their lives, which includes drawing less scrutiny.

The existence of garbage, and the limited options people on the street have when it comes to getting rid of it, is not something that can be ignored, Mapps said.

"Humans beings produce refuse. That's a reality that is unavoidable," he said. "One of the problems that we face right now is a lack of imagination around how people live today. We have thousands of people living out on the streets, but we haven't created the basic infrastructure for restrooms, showers, laundry, garbage service."

Stephanie Rawson, the manager of Metro's Solid Waste Cleanup & Enforcement Program, which cleans up illegal dump sites, agrees that more can be done.

"People understand that this is an issue and a challenge that needs to be addressed," she said, adding that she has been part of some low-key conversations with various service providers about starting more garbage-collection services.

One lesson Mapps learned from Parkrose's program is that effective collection is dependent upon knowing the location of homeless camps. Placing dumpsters and identifying drop-off sites, based on those locations, ensures that higher numbers of people will participate and drop off their garbage.

"It's a place-based service," he said.

