

# Advocates, park workers seek solutions to illegal camping

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*Regional stakeholders hope to work together to address the impacts of homeless people living in public parks and forests*

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

The meeting at the NW Natural building in Old Town drew nearly 100 attendees.

In a questionnaire prior to the event, many regional public parks and forest managers cited concerns about perceived public safety issues and environmental degradation in areas where people experiencing homelessness camp.

Participants indicated they'd seen encampments along Johnson and Beaver creeks, near the Columbia Slough and along Springwater Trail, although illegal camping in forests and parks is an issue throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Participants described having come across homeless encampments while conducting wildlife surveys, leading volunteer and student events, and performing other job duties, at times in protected and sensitive wildlife areas.

While some noted clean and well-kept camps and homeless occupants who were helpful in pointing out patches of invasive species growing nearby, others cited encounters where they were intimidated by aggressive dogs or faced people having mental health issues that they were unsure how to handle.

During roundtable discussions, many parks and forests employees expressed frustrations with feeling intrusive or threatened during interactions with people living in camps on public lands, as well as difficulties with angry neighbors and concerned constituents who call and complain about campers when there are no solutions they can offer to ease their angst.

The event drew dozens of land managers and field workers ranging from the lower to upper portions of the Willamette Basin and beyond, including from the Eugene, Corvallis, Vancouver, Seaside, Olympia and greater Portland metropolitan areas.

Also in attendance were employees at Multnomah County, Port of Portland, Portland Parks and Recreation and Bureau of Environmental Services. They were joined by Right to Survive, Willamette Riverkeeper, Bonneville Environmental Foundation and Portland Harbor Community Coalition, which all helped organize the forum and presented at it.

(Full disclosure: The advocacy arm of Street Roots was also involved, and Street Roots Executive Director Israel Bayer spoke at the event about factors that led to



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Oregon's housing crisis.)

A presentation from Mandy Davis, director of Trauma Informed Oregon, tied trauma-informed care to approaching people experiencing homelessness. She taught attendees about the many traumas campers are statistically likely to have experienced and how to avoid triggering negative responses when approaching encampments.

They also heard from homeless advocates and from people who are finding ways to connect people experiencing homelessness to resources while cleaning up natural areas.

For example, Michelle Emmons of Willamette Riverkeeper shared with the group how her organization's River Guardians Program in the Eugene-Springfield area is resolving both environmental and homeless issues at the same time.

Volunteers with the program receive trauma-informed training, and they offer garbage bags and disposal services to people living in camps they encounter while cleaning up areas along the Willamette River. They also provide strategically located needle and waste drop-off sites.

Emmons explained it not only activates and engages the community on issues around homelessness but also provides a clean and safe environment while increasing campers' access to resources.

Katie Kalpakis, with the city of Portland's Homelessness and Urban Camping Impact Reduction, pointed to a pilot project she initiated involving mobile flush toilets that are staffed by social service agency employees who serve as connection to services when people come to use the toilet. The idea originated when Kalpakis said she was shocked by widespread reports of human

waste on public property due to a lack of facilities for people living on the streets.

The daylong meeting concluded with participants tossing out new ideas that included programs to train campers on habitat restoration and park maintenance, providing them with a pathway that could lead toward employment and, ultimately, housing.

They also discussed collaborating in areas where multiple agencies have jurisdiction to provide campers with garbage and sanitation services.

Pooling their lobbying power with environmental and housing advocacy groups in Salem and continuing to partner on finding solutions, were also ideas on the table.

Many natural-area employees from more rural areas and Salem lamented that conversations around these issues were not happening where they live. They supported bringing trauma-informed training and collaboration between agencies and advocacy groups to discussions at their local government agencies.

Bringing training and collaboration to those rural areas will be one of the next steps taken, Bonneville Environmental Foundation's Kathleen Guillozet, the lead organizer of the event, said after the meeting.

She plans to organize the ideas collected at the event and present them to the offices of Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler and Commissioner Amanda Fritz, who oversees the Portland Parks and Recreation bureau. Guillozet said she also plans to apply for grants that will fund the on-the-ground materialization of some of the collaborative ideas that were expressed.

*Last winter, Sisters Of The Road provided people experiencing homelessness with photography classes and disposable cameras so that they could document their lives for a project called "Through Our Lens." These photos were on display at Monday's event at NW Natural. This photo depicts the campsite of a participant, Phoebe O., who was sleeping just off some trails in a wooded area of Southwest Portland. She is also a Street Roots vendor.*