

# **A Breath of Sanity from the S.C. County Mental Health Advisory Board Board Adopts *HUFF* Letter: Next Step—End the Sweeps & Start Services**

The ***Santa Cruz Mental Health Advisory Board*** strongly recommends that the Board of Supervisors take Immediate Action to help our homeless population by

1. Directing the County Behavioral Health Department to work with the Parks and Recreation Departments throughout the county to redesign and establish a health and safety focused Street Cleaning Encampment Protocol that is trauma sensitive and follows state law requiring the storage and later retrieval of taken property for 90 days.

2. Decrease cost by decreasing the number of Police units at Encampment Clean Ups. This is an issue of Public Health, not criminal. More than 3 armed officers is unnecessary, threatening, and expensive.

California Civil Code § 2080 et seq. imposes mandatory statutory duties on public entities and their employees and agents to maintain for a minimum of 90 days unattended property over which they have taken charge. Police departments are not storing the items taken during encampment cleanups. Police assisted street cleaning commonly referred to as “sweeps,” takes place across the county. Survival equipment and valuable personal items are thrown into Parks and Recreation dump truck vehicles never to be seen again. This is unlawful and unacceptable.

The daily police and sheriff altercations and destruction of people's property is a self-sustaining cycle that perpetuates the harmful circumstances and trauma disorders of the homeless people. Witnesses report that the police do not listen to the homeless people's pleas for visible specific survival items. Police can be heard threatening arrest throughout the process making people feel criminalized and terrified. Witnesses report recently watching the Police throw away a 40lb bag of dog food as the dog owner begged to be able to take it with her. Seizure and destruction of medicine is common and can be life threatening.

One way to comply with the law is to not take the property in the first place. This would also be cheaper. The public health goals of the camp cleanup programs are not being met. We think it can be done better, cheaper and get closer to solving the problem.

Studies of sweeps found that of the 174 camps removed by the LAPD last year, everyone has returned. The solution that is being employed is not solving the problem. The city has put fences around public parks that keep everybody out. The violent language and shock of the sweeps affect the most vulnerable in an already vulnerable population, increasing symptoms of PTSD and panic disorders. It is well documented that Veterans in this population are especially likely to suffer from these conditions. The daily sweeps of Coral St. starting June 3rd were predated by a city eviction notice of only 5 days. With physical disabilities even two weeks is often not enough. Five days is horrific.

Forcing disabled homeless people to move off of Coral Street is short sighted and harmful. Many people with illness or chronic conditions will likely miss appointments and postpone care due to a much further distance to travel to access Homeless Persons Health Project (HPHP) or the showers at Housing Matters. This ultimately can increase the severity of their conditions and keeps them unhoused and dependent on county funded nonprofit services longer.

Supporters of the police removal of the camps, cite spreading disease as a main concern. HIV, lung diseases, skin infections as well as mental health issues afflict this demographic in higher numbers than the general population. This is why forced migration is so dangerous. Forcing people to move further away from the resources offered by HPHP can increase spread of contagious diseases and seems to be in complete opposition to the stated health concerns of the county. We need to prioritize public health.

Tents, bedding, tarps, food, clothing, shoes, water bottles, backpacks, chargers, phones, cleaning supplies, bikes, mobility aids, medicine, propane tanks, portable batteries, coolers, laptops, art materials, family memorabilia, pet food, even ID's, birth certificates and identification papers are destroyed making it even more impossible to seek services in the County. Some of these items are hard to acquire and some are the most basic tools needed to get out of survival camps and off of assistance programs.

The cycles of property seizure and destruction makes it extremely difficult for homeless people to maintain the stability required to keep in touch with employment/family/doctors, develop routines, sleep, eat, and ultimately survive when living without shelter and everything is destroyed... over and over. Recent statistics from Behavioral Health indicate that on average 43% of the people they serve are unhoused, but this is likely an understatement due to the exclusion of contract services.

In this county alone we have witnessed the loss of homes to fires and floods and we do not know when an earthquake may cause more loss. In addition, the economic downturn especially in the local tech industries, plus the exorbitant cost of reasonable housing in this area- this should give us pause to consider that no one is immune to losing their home. About 15,000 people are becoming homeless each week in the US now. We suggest that a more compassionate and sustainable plan will not only help homeless people now, but could build a better infrastructure of resources and support.

This method of Police action against Encampments is not working. With national attention on the homeless crisis, here in Santa Cruz County we have an opportunity to implement solutions that work. Current practices are not bringing solutions- they are exacerbating the problem.

Undeniably there is a need for safety, trash removal, and walkability all over the County. Let us all work together to navigate a new solution that prioritizes health and allocates funding to help not punish homeless people, including senior citizens and veterans. Thank you.