

From: [P. Oaks](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: Written testimony for agenda Items 899-903: Serious concerns about proposed mass camps and ban on living outside
Date: Saturday, October 22, 2022 5:45:09 PM

Hello,

I have recently sent this message (with only slight differences) as an email to Mayor Wheeler and Portland City Council. I am now submitting it as written testimony for Wednesday, October 26 (Agenda Items 899-903). The **bolded** points are the ones I would most like to emphasize because of their importance.

I write as someone who has been homeless in Portland, but who is now blessed to be housed. When I was unhoused, I camped outside in a wooded area for about three months and then lived in a shelter for about six months. I have feedback on Mayor Wheeler's proposal involving the mass camps.

I agree with him on wishing sidewalks were clear. I agree with in wishing we could do away with the trash, the violence, the unsanitary conditions, and other things that pose risks to the community. I have previously lived with someone in a wheelchair, and I have seen firsthand how it's important that sidewalks be accessible. Getting unhoused people off the streets is a win-win situation for everyone--if it is done effectively and without violating human rights.

There are many serious problems with the proposal involving mass camps. It is likely to either be stopped before it is enacted or actually make the problem worse if/when it is. It should not be necessary to impose such a plan in order to make the sidewalks wheelchair-accessible.

Even just looking at homelessness from a fiscal perspective, **multiple studies** (linked below) **have shown that it costs taxpayers significantly less to provide an individual with permanent housing than to have them living on the streets**--because of incarceration and camp sweeping costs, emergency room and hospital costs, costs to clean public areas, and more.

I do not want to see the City of Portland do something similar to what Ron DeSantis did recently when he wasted huge sums of taxpayer dollars to fly immigrants to Martha's Vineyard against their will in order to do away with them. I do not want to see the City of Portland warehousing "undesireables" in a way that is also comparable to when Trump put refugee kids in cages. I do not want to see the city doing anything even close to those things.

In order to successfully get unhoused folks off the streets and into a different form of shelter (if they can't get into housing right away), **the following all need to be accounted for:**

1. They need to have **usable restroom facilities, showers, and laundry** services on-site or nearby.
2. **There need to be measures taken to prevent the spread of lice, bed bugs, fleas, COVID-19, monkeypox, norovirus, influenza, hepatitis, and other contagious parasites and diseases.** These often flourish in areas where people are concentrated in close quarters and/or lack consistent access to hygiene. If the camps become parasite or disease breeding grounds, then they'd pose a serious public health risk.

3. Some unhoused folks rely on wheelchairs or other mobility devices. Any place they stay **needs to be accessible**. It also needs to be accessible to folks who are vision and/or hearing-impaired or have other disabilities.
4. **Unhoused folks who have allergies or environmental sensitivities need to be able to stay somewhere with minimal triggers of those conditions.** They include food allergens, cigarette smoke, other drug-related fumes, air pollution, animals, dust, dirt, autism triggers (ie, certain kinds of light and sound, being touched), noise (especially for those with sleep disorders or who are light sleepers), and PTSD triggers (particularly in people who have escaped abusive situations and/or who have been sexually assaulted).
5. **Folks who are in recovery from alcohol or drugs or who want to start recovery need to be encouraged, not made to live in a situation where it's easier to relapse.**
6. Folks who often face discrimination and hate need to be safe wherever they stay. These people include trans and nonbinary people, LGB+ people, women, people of color, people who are not Christian, and others. I'm a trans man. When I was unhoused, I was still presenting as a woman, so I stayed in a women's shelter. **Now that I've transitioned, I wouldn't feel safe staying at men's shelter if I lost my housing because of not only the transphobia, but the high risk of sexual assault as well. Trans people of all genders often experience sexual violence, hostile environments, violent attacks, and/or discrimination when they're unhoused.**
7. Couples and families shouldn't be separated. People with pets need to be able to keep them, at least as long as those pets do not harm or disturb others.
8. Youths need to stay somewhere where they can **go to school** and are supported in improving their lives.
9. **Victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of violence need to be able to stay somewhere safe from their abusers.**
10. **Supportive staff are needed to keep people in the facility from harming others.** There needs to be a protocol for removing people who threaten or cause serious harm to others.
11. **Case managers are needed** to help people apply for housing, jobs, and benefits and navigate the process of getting those things. I know from personal experience working for a nonprofit that **there are many unhoused people who really want to work. Not having adequate housing makes it difficult for many to find or keep work.** Adequate case management and housing workshops were vital in helping me get back into housing.
12. People with trauma and mental health issues need a place where they can heal, **not a place that will worsen their conditions and that's likely to drive some people to suicide.**
13. People need to have a **secure place to store their belongings** where they're kept safe from theft and weather conditions.
14. People need to have the ability to take public transportation and **move about freely.** They **should not be forced into conditions that needlessly disempower them,** infantilize them, or take away their ability to make their own health or life decisions.
15. Any place people stay needs to be built according to safety standards in case of emergencies such as fires.
16. It is vital that people are **adequately protected from extreme weather and pollution.** This includes wildfire smoke, heat, cold, and rain.

The key to getting unhoused people off the streets is not to keep arresting and prosecuting them if they do not get out of sight, which then gives them a criminal record and makes it even

harder for them to find housing and jobs. **It is downright cruel to effectively mandate that someone has to stay in a mass camp with bad living conditions, or be arrested or get into any form of legal trouble.** (This vicious cycle is also a waste of limited policing resources that could be better used to stop serious crimes like gun violence and fentanyl distribution.)

The key is **giving people better options than camping on the streets** and incentives. Listen to people who are or have been unhoused in the process of developing solutions. After I spent my first night homeless camping outside, **I signed up for a shelter bed, only to go right back outside after one night because the noise in the shelter made it nearly impossible to sleep. I slept better in the woods where I camped in my case. It took months before I got to the front of the list for another shelter that had better conditions than the first.**

The following would be **better options** than the proposed mass camps:

1. Creating more areas around the city where people can park their RVs and legally sleep in their vehicles
2. Creating **campuses with services** instead of just large concentrated camping areas, and setting up **smaller sleeping areas** so that people are not sleeping in such huge numbers in any spot
3. Creating **more, smaller areas around the city** where people can camp in tents and removing any legal barriers to camping on private property with permission.
4. Creating city-funded programs in which churches, organizations, and motels can open up their parking lots and/or indoor facilities to camping
5. Creating **more hygiene hubs and tiny home villages like those run by Hygiene 4 All PDX**
6. Creating more **drug and alcohol recovery beds** and/or small camps, and fully enact the services under Measure 110
7. Creating **more supportive places where people with serious mental health conditions can live** so that they don't keep cycling between the streets, hospitalization, and jail.
8. Creating **facilities or smaller camps that are specific to vulnerable groups that they can go to if they don't feel safe in other shelters or camps.** These groups include trans and nonbinary people, Black people, Indigenous people, women, veterans, seniors, etc. (The BIPOC camp run by Hygiene 4 All PDX has been a huge success, with people finding great community and support there.)
9. **Improving conditions in existing facilities, especially for people of color and trans people who often get discriminated against there.** I know of various instances of **people from these marginalized groups being kicked out of shelters** for either defending themselves against bigots who were attacking them (when staff wouldn't intervene properly) or because staff falsely accused them of behavioral infractions they didn't do. I know that, as of recently, this has been a **serious issue at shelters run by Transition Projects.** It needs to be properly investigated and changed.
10. Enacting policies that **prevent more people from becoming homeless in the first place, especially people who are priced out of housing.** For many, simply funding their relocation is not enough.
11. Scaling up the **production of affordable housing, especially for people with very low incomes.**
12. When distributing tents and other survival gear, JOHS can perhaps give them out with a note **advising people not to block sidewalks with tents.** This seems like a more

sensible solution than for JOHS to stop giving out survival gear to folks who really need it.

Unhoused folks are a very diverse population that ends up in their situation for many different reasons, and there is no one solution that works for everyone. Improving people's situations and getting them housed are not going to be needlessly difficult if a mass, concentrated, one-size-fits all solution is imposed. There need to be various programs and options available for different people.

The answer is not going to come from stereotyping unhoused folks as lazy, violent, and/or drug addicts and treating them like dirt to be done away with by any means possible--which looks more **like a step in a genocide than anything. No one should be forced into cruel, abusive, or dehumanizing conditions simply because they are unhoused.**

Thank you for your time and consideration.
Sincerely,

Mr. Phoenix Oaks
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Links to studies:

<https://www.mic.com/articles/86251/study-reveals-it-costs-less-to-give-the-homeless-housing-than-to-leave-them-on-the-street>

<https://phys.org/news/2017-03-housing-homeless-cheaper-society.html>