

From: [Claire Bryan](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: Agenda item 309 (4-19-23)
Date: Sunday, April 16, 2023 10:04:55 PM

I wish to submit testimony that I do not welcome Urban Alchemy to Portland OR to manage houselessness.

I am a Multnomah voting resident, and feel that this will be another money sink without actually helping the situation.

Sent from my iPhone, typos happen.....

From: [Katie Stephens](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: 4/19/23 Agenda Item 309 Written Testimony
Date: Monday, April 17, 2023 12:48:37 PM

Hello,

While I'm unable to provide verbal testimony this week, please see written testimony in regards to agenda item 309 for the city council meeting on 4/19/23.

As an inpatient hospital social worker witnessing the detrimental physical, mental and emotional effects of homelessness on a daily basis, I have significant concerns about the city's plan to pay Urban Alchemy \$10 million a year to monitor Safe Rest Villages. There have been numerous complaints against Urban Alchemy in other cities for misconduct that leave Portlanders accessing services in Safe Rest Villages vulnerable to more abuse and trauma. I would urge you to reconsider how far that \$10 million per year could go towards working with existing non-profit organizations in the city that already have trust with the community instead of bringing in this outside organization. That money could be spent towards permanent housing and social services that address the root causes of homelessness rather than wasting it on an unnecessary, exorbitantly overpriced "service".

Thank you,
Katie Stephens, LCSW

From: [Emily](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: Written Testimony for 4/19 (Agenda Item 309)
Date: Tuesday, April 18, 2023 8:47:59 AM

My name is Emily and I am a resident of Portland who cares deeply for our unhoused neighbors. Since Commissioner Gonzalez has instated a tent and tarp distribution ban I've had to buy tents on my own as Street Response can no longer help out. Really what I want and what our unhoused neighbors want are not tents - it's actual housing!

I am opposed to Urban Alchemy. And I am opposed to using \$50 million dollars to contract Urban Alchemy to run mass encampments. With that \$50 million dollars we could provide actual literal housing for 473 people for five years at the 1-bedroom market rate. We could fund programs such as Eviction Representation for all for 4 years. I am opposed to not just Urban Alchemy - but any other organization that tries to contract for these mass encampments. Just like in the name for the agenda item - these mass encampments are temporary shelter services - not actual housing solutions! Listen to the public's opposition to Urban Alchemy. And listen to the public's opposition to these mass encampments.

Our unhoused neighbors deserve actual housing. And our tax payer dollars should be used to address root causes and systemic solutions. I urge my representatives to vote no on Agenda Item 309.

From: [Kat Mahoney](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: Council Agenda April 19, 2023 - Written Testimont for item: 309
Date: Tuesday, April 18, 2023 11:25:03 AM
Attachments: [4192023_Testimony_309_KAT.docx.pdf](#)

Please find attached my written testimony regarding

309

[*Authorize Price Agreement to purchase temporary shelter operation services for amount not to exceed \\$50 million over five years \(Emergency Ordinance\)](#)

Introduced by Mayor Ted Wheeler

Bureau Management and Finance Revenue and Financial Services

Kat Mahoney

pronouns: she/her

Acting Executive Director

kat@sistersoftheroad.org



618 NW Davis
Portland OR 97209



Via Email: cctestimony@portlandoregon.gov

To: Portland City Council Members - Mayor Ted Wheeler, Carmen Rubio, Mingus Mapps, Dan Ryan, Rene Gonzales

Agenda: Item 309: Emergency Ordinance - *Authorize Price Agreement to purchase temporary shelter operation services for amount not to exceed \$50 million over five years

Date: April 16, 2023

Position: Oppose the emergency ordinance and contract with Urban Alchemy

Dear City Council,

I am Kat Mahoney, the Executive Director of Sisters of the Road. Sisters has operated in the Old Town neighborhood since 1979 and is best known for its nonprofit cafe. Sisters is also a social justice organization that seeks to empower and educate people to find their voice and advocate for systemic change. We are driven by our values and philosophies which are relationship based and community centered.

Today, I am writing to oppose the emergency ordinance and invest in solutions that will address the issue of being homeless. The temporary shelters and encampments in this contract are band aids at best and do not serve the people who you seek to place there. These will simply hide the problem with inadequate services and leave folks with few alternatives for other solutions.

You may have seen our post on social media that pointed out what \$50 million could be used for instead:

- You could provide housing for 473 people for 5 years at the 1 bedroom market rate.
- You could fund programs like Eviction Representation For All which seeks to give people access to the justice system and a fair trial.
- You could have funded Sister of the Road for the last 43 years.

Homelessness is a systemic problem that needs systemic solutions

Study after study has unanimously pointed towards housing as a step towards assisting those who are living unsheltered. Did you know that Finland has virtually eliminated street homelessness and reduced housing costs for all its residents at the same time? The success of the Finnish housing model employed a strategy where the state government provided financial subsidies for both the supply side (construction of homes) and the demand side (renter or homebuyer assistance). The counties provided land for affordable housing in exchange for infrastructure funding and other land use support. This

stabilization of housing creates safety and opportunity for those who need other services without the stressors of a shelter environment.

Housing first involves providing people with assistance in finding and obtaining safe, secure and permanent housing as quickly as possible. Key to this strategy is that individuals and families are not required to first demonstrate that they are 'ready' for housing. Housing is not conditional on sobriety or abstinence. It is a human centered approach and a rights-based approach that emphasizes choice in terms of housing and supports. It also supports recovery, going beyond just meeting basic needs, for those who suffer from addiction.

Learning about the root cause is the first step towards creating long term solutions. The most common reasons someone may end up living unsheltered are:

- Being trapped in poverty with stagnant wages and rising costs of home ownership, rent, and other necessities.
- Difficulty finding employment and being unemployed for long periods of time due to circumstances beyond their control.
- Lack of affordable housing. Portland's average rent for a 1 and 2 bedroom apartment is \$2,529 according to KOIN's article from Sept 13, 2022. Portlanders would need a salary around \$100,000 to afford the average rent.
- Lack of affordable healthcare. Many people are uninsured or underinsured. One serious injury or accident could push an individual or family to living unsheltered.
- Lack of mental health and addiction services. A lack of stable housing also exacerbates mental health and addiction issues. Without treatment services, it is very difficult for someone to break the cycle.
- Racial disparity. Minoritized people experience homelessness at a higher rate than the white population. According to research from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, black Americans are 3 times more likely to lose housing. Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, and Indigenous Americans are also disproportionately affected. The reasons why are based in racial inequalities such as racial discrimination in housing and incarceration.
- Domestic violence. To escape domestic violence, people will flee their homes without a plan. If they don't have a place to stay, they can end up living in cars, moving from shelter to shelter, or on the street.

Invest in solutions geared towards these inequalities that will ideally stop someone from ending up without a home. Invest in long term, systemic solutions. Give people back their dignity. Homelessness is systemic and stubborn. Go to the root.

Thank you for your time,

Kat Mahoney
Executive Director
Sisters of the Road
Kat@sistersoftheroad.org

From: [Jargon Scott](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: testimony for Agenda item 309, April 19, 2023
Date: Tuesday, April 18, 2023 5:54:23 PM

An appropriation of \$50 million for the currently-proposed temporary shelter operation is unconscionably irresponsible. That sum of money can be spent far more effectively on system root cause issues, such as rent stabilization, eviction representation in court, food programs, or even cash benefits. It would be far cheaper and more effective to spend that money on market-rate housing and supportive services. Especially considering the troubling record of Urban Alchemy at other sites, there is no reason why we should support this misguided and performative action. The solution to a housing crisis is more housing! We need real housing and real services, not multi-million dollar sites for tents on palettes.

Josh Hetrick
Portland, Oregon

From: [Jessi Presley-Grusin](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: Item no. 309
Date: Tuesday, April 18, 2023 6:11:49 PM

Written testimony on item no. 309:

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to ask that you withdraw consideration of Urban Alchemy for managing the proposed mass encampment at SE Gideon, and oppose any effort to partner with them in the future. Urban Alchemy has a poor track record including: a general lack of adequate training for their employees, wage theft and other labor related allegations, assault and distribution of drugs, and an overwhelming failure to secure permanent housing for the residents of the sites they already manage. Urban Alchemy as well as the city of Portland have failed to address any of these concerns in the community meetings surrounding this plan of action. Without specific and measureable protocols in place to avoid repeating their missteps, Urban Alchemy will continue to fail our communities and will only heighten our ongoing struggles surrounding houselessness.

Additionally, we have better working alternatives already in place that would benefit from the funds proposed, and that would actually produce the desired results of getting and keeping more people housed were they given adequate financial support. Consulting any number of the local organizations currently working to eliminate houselessness would provide you with a dearth of causes worth supporting. Please reconsider your plan to hire on Urban Alchemy, at minimum until they have a real plan to correct course.

Thank you for your time,

Jessi Presley-Grusin

From: [david.bollinger](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: Written Testimony for 4/19 (Agenda Item 309)
Date: Tuesday, April 18, 2023 9:53:42 PM

My name is David and I am a resident of Portland who cares deeply for our unhoused neighbors.

I am opposed to Urban Alchemy. And I am opposed to using \$50 million dollars to contract Urban Alchemy to run mass encampments. With that \$50 million dollars we could provide actual literal housing for 473 people for five years at the 1-bedroom market rate. We could fund programs such as Eviction Representation for all for 4 years. I am opposed to not just Urban Alchemy - but any other organization that tries to contract for these mass encampments. Just like in the name for the agenda item - these mass encampments are temporary shelter services - not actual housing solutions! Listen to the public's opposition to Urban Alchemy. And listen to the public's opposition to these mass encampments.

Our unhoused neighbors deserve actual housing. And our tax payer dollars should be used to address root causes and systemic solutions. I urge my representatives to vote no on Agenda Item 309.

Sent with [Proton Mail](#) secure email.

From: [christine borden](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: Council Item #309: urban alchemy budget
Date: Tuesday, April 18, 2023 10:25:45 PM

Hello I'm a Portland resident who is fortunate enough to have my own house with a bathroom and a cozy bed to sleep in and be dry every night. It breaks my heart to see so many neighbors suffering without housing and support. I have two adult children and if they told me that they were taking enough money to rent an apartment in the suburbs and instead buying a tent on a pallet with some rent a cops to guard them, I would tell them that I love them but it's the stupidest plan I've ever heard.

I DO NOT LOVE OUR CITY GOVERNMENT. They are hoarding the money for their personal security systems and not giving our tax money to the people who need it most-the underserved, marginalized community members who need a help and home.

I'm ashamed of the choices that Ted Wheeler, Rene Gonzales and Mingus Mapps are making with my tax dollars. This plan with Urban Alchemy is cruel and inane.

Buy housing with that money, and until that is available, give away more tents!

Have a peaceful day
C Borden
Portland

From: [Tim McCormick](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: written testimony for City Council meeting 2023-04-19, 9:30am, Item #309
Date: Wednesday, April 19, 2023 4:00:58 AM
Attachments: [Housing-Alternatives-testimony_PDX-council_2023-04-19_Item-309.pdf](#)

Please find attached my written testimony, submitted on behalf of Housing Alternatives Network, for Portland City Council meeting 2023-04-19, 9:30am, Item #309. It's also available online, linked from the page at <http://tmccormick.org/writing/temp-alternative-shelter-sites>, in case that's helpful.

Please confirm that this testimony was received, and has been made part of the public record. If possible, can you let me know if there's a official place where it can be linked to / viewed online?

Fyi, I am also signed up to give spoken testimony at the meeting. I expect it will be basically a shorter version of this letter, and I plan to email councilclerk@portlandoregon.gov to request that this letter may be displayed by me (or by the clerk) while I testify, to provide accompanying visual presentation.

thanks, Tim

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Tim McCormick
Housing Alternatives Network
<http://housingalternatives.net>
+1 503.334.1894.
Video: meet.tmccormick.org
tmccormick.org/ / [@tmccormick](#)

Date: April 19, 2023

From: Tim McCormick
Director, Housing Alternatives Network

To: Mayor Wheeler, Portland City Council members, and City staff

Subj: Testimony for [April 19th City Council meeting, Item #309](#) .
(available online at: tmccormick.org/writing/temp-alternative-shelter-sites)

Dear Mayor & Councilmembers,

My name is Tim McCormick, and I'm the director of [Housing Alternatives Network](#) in Portland. I'd like to ask you today to imagine, for Temporary Alternative Shelter sites and future affordable housing, seeding a new, locally developed approach, and a different path than just temporary 'pod' products: what we could call the **Portland PAD, or Portable Affordable Dwelling**.

This proposal stems from & weaves together work done over many years by and with various non-profits and builders on new, low-cost shelter and housing approaches. Particularly, as opened up by new Portland & Oregon legislation, e.g. [Shelter to Housing Continuum](#), and HB 2001 ([2019](#) & [2023](#)).

We need approaches old, new, fast, and many, because we have a huge civic challenge before us – including finding bridges out of deep polarization, fear, and frustration.



I believe we have before us not just a crisis, but a tremendous *opportunity* to birth, out of this acute and embattled situation, uniquely Portland, transformative responses; and to bridge our chasms.



What if we ask, what is the shelter / housing equivalent of the Portland food cart: portable, adaptable, launchpad for affordable & cutting-edge food, and for creative urban change? They aren't just cheaper, smaller restaurants, but are the adaptive, leading edge of our food scene, which everyone loves and people travel from around the world to see.

Or consider what would be the housing equivalents of the [Portland Loo](#) – that ingenious, internationally deployed product of, and ambassador for, Portland and its unique problem-solving ability. Its slogans: *"Unique Solution to a Universal Problem"*, and *"Designed by the city, for the city."*



What if we today build upon the amazing, 2016 [POD Initiative](#) that brought the city's advocacy, houseless, and design communities together to design beautiful and smart shelter PODS?



What if, we creatively developed this as a new, intermediate rung in our response: a rapidly deployable, movable, very low-cost, shelter that's upgradeable to & siteable as permanent housing, e.g. a cottage cluster or as backyard cottage. Joining and complementing the [Mass Casitas](#) innovative single-family housing program ramping up at [Port of Portland's T2](#) with [Hacienda CDC](#)?



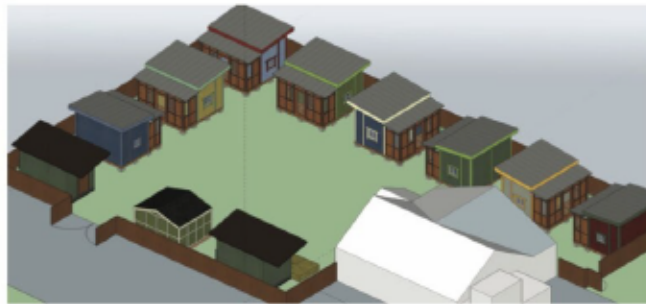
Experienced non-profits in Portland have, over years, nurtured the seeds for such a transformative Portland approach. For example, laws now allow rapid development of "Outdoor Shelter" type villages, where sites and/or units can highly cost-effectively, incremental build into permanent affordable housing. This is being built, today, in Portland, at costs comparable to pallet shelters, but training and employing formerly unhoused and in-recovery Portlanders.



STREET VIEW - NE 160TH AVE
NOT TO SCALE



SITE PLAN
NOT TO SCALE



BIRD'S EYE VIEW
NOT TO SCALE

12&12 Village on Glisan



Let's summon leading minds, our better angels, our extraordinary ecology of housing innovators, to weave a new, home-grown creative initiative into the Temporary Alternative Shelter Sites & related programs: the Portland PAD, Portable Affordable Dwelling. "Good citizens are the riches of a city"

Tim McCormick
Housing Alternatives Network,
Portland, OR
(503) 334-1894, housingalternatives.net

From: [annie](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: agenda item 309
Date: Wednesday, April 19, 2023 7:41:33 AM

We should be using city money to house people and provide direct services, not for questionable agencies from out of state.

Pay for hotel rooms, prevent evictions; dont build camps.

No on Urban Alchemy.

annie capestany

From: [Brian S. Ellis](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: Item 309/Urban Alchemy Contract
Date: Wednesday, April 19, 2023 9:05:56 AM

City Council;

While this email is probably too late, and the vote on funding for Urban Alchemy is a foregone conclusion, I wanted to express what a poor use of funds this contract is.

For the amount of money spent on this Urban Alchemy contract it would be a cheaper and more efficient use of city dollars to simply give this money to our houseless neighbors and allow them to rent motel rooms. Which would also result in better living conditions for those involved. But the fact of the matter is that this city council is so obsessed with punishing the homeless for being homeless, that utilitarian alternatives escape them. It is not enough to simply be unfeeling/indifferent to these houseless people, we now have a group of people in charge of city dollars who are obsessed with wasting money to ensure that the impoverished citizens of Portland are actively harmed.

Beyond this obsession with punishing the homeless, it is striking how eager the city is to engage with out-of-state businesses with poor records and poor outcomes who nevertheless have good marketing? In particular, it is the mayor who seems the most brand conscious, and it is strange to think of a con-man who themselves cannot recognize a scam when it is presented to them. While Urban Alchemy may have a finely tuned exterior, it is another hollow corporation who intends to run a poorly managed and little regulated open-air prison. One that I am sure will abuse the people who are forced to stay there, and I'm sure, when the time comes, the city council will feign surprise when homeless Portlanders refuse to stay there.

Please do not do this.

Brian Stephen Ellis.

--

(he/they)

From: [Andy Olshin](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: Fwd: AOlshin Testimony Agenda Item 309
Date: Wednesday, April 19, 2023 10:28:55 AM
Attachments: [AOlshin TestimonyClintonTriangle.pdf](#)
[ATT00001.htm](#)

City Council Clerk

Good morning.

Attached please find a copy of the testimony I will be presenting today on Item 309. I will bring color copies to distribute to Council present in-person and would appreciate your forwarding it to those participating remotely.

Thanks,
Andy Olshin

Begin forwarded message:

From: Andy Olshin <andrew.olshin@comcast.net>
Date: April 19, 2023 at 10:03:17 AM PDT
To: printandgo@fedex.com
Subject: AOlshin TestimonyClintonTriangle

Wednesday, April 19th Testimony by Andrew Olshin, Founder and Executive Director of Cascadia Clusters. Please feel free to contact him with any questions @ (503) 407-8494 or Andrew.OlshinComcast.net. Thank you

My name is Andy Olshin. Thank you all for your public service. Special thanks to Commissioner Ryan for his determined, uphill efforts to develop the Safe Rest Villages - thank you brother and thank you for honoring the memory of Nick Fish - and to Mayor Wheeler for remembering that our sidewalks, parks and other public spaces belong to all Portlanders - and for bringing Urban Alchemy to our City.

I am the Founder and Executive Director of Cascadia Clusters - a 6 year old 501(c)(3) nonprofit. We develop and implement collaborative non-profit, faith, foundation and private sector housing-related projects focused on training houseless individuals in the construction trades. Sometimes we include local government - although that tends to slow things down.

We are here today to enthusiastically and optimistically express our support for what we see as a new and improved entry point to our affordable housing continuum. We have met and spoken with representatives of Urban Alchemy and believe they will meet our houseless neighbors where they are at, respect who they are and share their experience, strength and hope with them. In other words. They get it.

We believe this can work at scale, as proposed by Urban Alchemy. Why? Three reasons, 1. Under this contract six new villages will be operated and managed by people who have lived experience in poverty and homelessness, addiction and incarceration; 2. Because smaller, intentional, self-governed communities have worked and continue to work in Portlandia - Dignity Village, R2DToo and Hazelnut Grove AND, 3. Urban Alchemy has already shown an openness and willingness to partner with locally grown organizations that have been working and living on our streets.

We are also here to point out a missing piece in the agreement between Urban Alchemy and the City and offer a solution.

The 50+ page agreement requires Urban Alchemy to meet and report on its efforts to connect residents with employment yet does not provide any resources for them to do so.

We'd like to help. If welcomed by Urban Alchemy, we will donate a 25 foot enclosed tractor trailer to them and work with them to quickly convert it into a mobile, sheltered woodshop and solar microgrid workshop for residents of the Clinton Triangle village.

This 8' high, 7 ½' wide x 25' long workshop could itself be heated and lit with a solar microgrid we would build in partnership with the Clinton Triangle villagers.

In addition to solar microgrids, the woodshop could be used to teach villagers how to build stick-built furniture for the villages including picnic tables, planter boxes for gardens and mini-benches or storage boxes for use in homes and around the village.

It could be operated as an on-site “sheltered workshop” program offering residents an opportunity to be paid “by the piece”.

Here are some pictures of items built by some of our houseless trainees:



2-top picnic tables.



Hand-made tiny house benches made by a CC Trainee using scrap 2x4's



Sober CC Trainee sitting in Unit #1 at a desk he helped build on top of a floor he helped install etc.



Cascadia Clusters Construction Trainer Bob Brimmer standing on the ladder/stairs he designed and built for Unit #1.



A Cascadia Clusters Trainee “skinning” Unit #2 at the 12 & 12 Village on Glisan we are currently building in partnership with City Team and the Arabic Life Church (16001 NE Glisan). All materials were donated by Woodland Wood Connections.



Solar powered micro grid built by CC Trainee who lived on "the streets" for 10 years.



Level platform with tiny house subfloor for Unit 2 at the 12 & 12 Village.

Troubling Rise of Urban Alchemy

Privatization of public space,
labor exploitation, and
criminalization of
homelessness



Urban Alchemy is on their way to becoming one of the most powerful profiteers in the homelessness industry; creating a dangerous precedent for cities in the U.S.

A nonprofit based in San Francisco, Urban Alchemy receives nearly \$50 million through contracts managing shelters, sanctioned encampments, and hygiene stations.

Increasingly, and a cause for major concern, they are tasked to patrol public streets, parks, and transit stations despite not being a licensed private security company.

It's difficult to walk the streets of San Francisco without seeing one of their uniforms.

You will instantly spot their Alchemist inspired branding. A logo representing their 'third eye' and jarring slogans invoking an unnerving feeling of being watched or surveilled.



"Once you see us, you can't unsee us"

The logo represents "the part of us that cannot be cheated, manipulated, or deceived" or what they call:

No fuckery™

Despite their insistence on 'no fuckery' there sure seems to be a lot of fuckery going on behind the scenes.



This zine will dig into the history of Urban Alchemy, their lucrative contracts, exploitative labor practices, displacement, criminalization, and the overall impact they have among unhoused people in California and beyond.

It's time we open our third eye and practice the principles of Urban Alchemy.

Disband HSOC and Fire Jeff Kositsky | San Francisco Street Sheet | June 11, 2021

Homeless Exclusion Districts: How California Business Improvement Districts Use Policy Advocacy and Policing Practices to Exclude Homeless People from Public Space | UC Berkeley School of Law | July 27, 2018

SF's Original Homelessness Czar Has a New Gig With a Fast-Rising Local Nonprofit | Kristi Coale | The Frisc | April 1, 2022

SF Has Fought Homelessness With No-Bid Jobs. Here's How Urban Alchemy Has Used Them As a Springboard (Part 1 & 2) | Kristi Coale | The Frisc | April 25-26 2022

Shooting of Tenderloin 'Ambassador' Raises Questions about Security Practices at Fast-Growing Urban Alchemy | Matt Smith & David Sjostedt | SF Standard | February 28, 2022

Service providers raise concerns about the new manager of Austin's homeless shelter | Andrew Weber | Texas Standard | July 29, 2022

Portland leaders start work on plan to ban homeless camping | Rebecca Ellis | OPB | October 26, 2022

Exclusive: Urban Alchemy CEO opens up on big contracts, the mayor and a spiritual mission | Jeff Elder | San Francisco Examiner | April 12, 2022

Exclusive: Urban Alchemy on security, racism and scrutiny | Jeff Elder | San Francisco Examiner | April 28, 2022

Ground Score Association | Trash 4 Peace | Portland, Oregon | <https://www.trashforpeace.org/groundscore>

Artwork was provided by Western Regional

On October 21, 2022, during a press conference, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler unveiled his proposal to create three massive sanctioned encampments of up to 500 people each and implement a citywide public camping ban.

When asked by a reporter who would manage these encampments, Ted Wheeler said he was consulting with Urban Alchemy and would visit Los Angeles in the following days to further discussions with them about coming to Portland.

After his visit in Los Angeles, his top aide and former mayor, Sam Adams, said they are a strong contender to run the encampments. Ted Wheeler also stressed the importance of using the private sector in order to address issues of homelessness. He said it was a common theme brought up in his conversations.

Although unclear if Urban Alchemy will be awarded a contract, the future is looking like they will take over, continuing their reign of terror, block by block.

References

(Dis)Placement: The Fight for Housing and Community After Echo Park Lake | UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy | March 23, 2022

'The Fence is Never Coming Down,' and Other Things Urban Alchemy Told Us | Jon Peltz | Knock LA | July 1, 2021

Urban Alchemy: A rapid

Early History of Urban Alchemy: SF's Pit Stop

Urban Alchemy started as a project of Hunter's Point Family, a nonprofit serving predominately Black neighborhoods in San Francisco. In 2014, with support from the Department of Public Works, Urban Alchemy launched Pit Stop, a mobile hygiene and workforce development program.



The program was premised on reintegration for people who were recently released on parole, self-described 'lifers'. Workers were housed in temporary re-entry programs and were tasked with overseeing and maintaining bathrooms and hand-washing stations, spanning six locations.

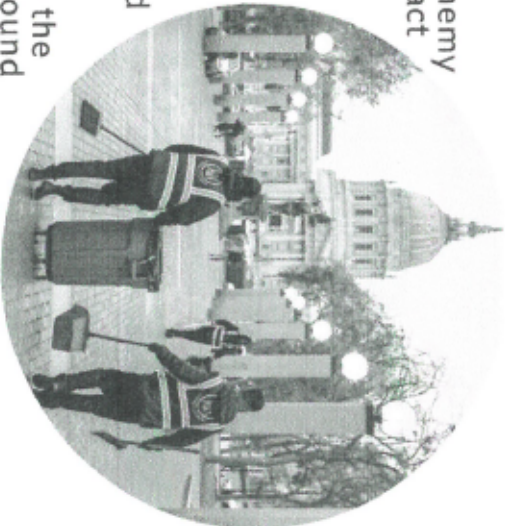
What began as a project with only twenty-four employees soon expanded to Venice and Los Angeles; marking the beginning of what would become a lucrative enterprise, delving deep into the insidious business of homelessness.



Urban Alchemy rapidly expands operations during pandemic

Urban Alchemy didn't really take off until the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In May 2020, Urban Alchemy won a \$10 million contract to operate a sanctioned encampment located near San Francisco City Hall, the first of many established during the onset of the pandemic.

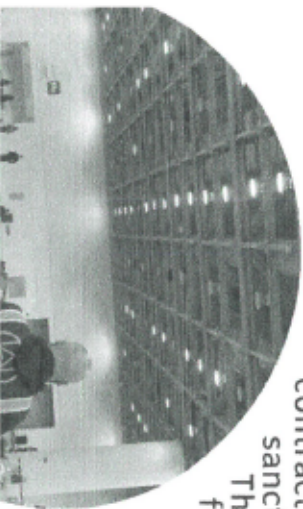


Government and nonprofit run sanctioned encampments became increasingly common in large cities, especially in the west; acting as a workaround for Martin v. Boise. The Ninth Circuit ruled enforcement of camping bans are unconstitutional if no other shelter is available.

Since indoor shelters posed a greater risk for spreading the COVID-19 virus, cities pivoted to sanctioned encampments as a means to continue sweeps.

In 2021, Urban Alchemy was awarded a \$2.3 million contract to operate another sanctioned encampment.

This contract was shortly followed up with another \$5 million contract to oversee a vacant lot filled with cabins for unhoused people. Both sites were located in downtown San Francisco.



Urban Alchemy National Expansion

Although most of their contracts are in San Francisco and Los Angeles, Urban Alchemy currently operates in thirteen cities in California. They don't intend to stop their growth in California, however.

In late 2021 Urban Alchemy hired Jeff Kositsky to facilitate their 'national expansion' with the goal to increase their finances to over \$100 million.

Jeff Kositsky was the first director of San Francisco's Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing appointed in 2016. He was in charge of all things homelessness related in San Francisco.

Later on, in 2020, he was appointed as the director of San Francisco's Healthy Streets Operating Center, the city agency behind many of the City's sweeps. He came under intense scrutiny after emails calling for the removal of public restrooms to deter camping were revealed.

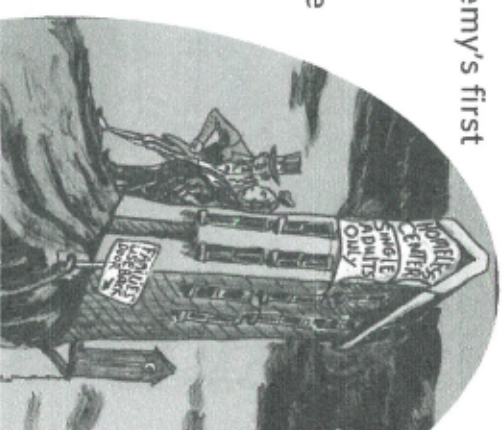
After calls for his resignation, he left his position at the City and quietly joined Urban Alchemy.

Austin, Texas was Urban Alchemy's first venture outside California.

On July 28, 2022, Austin City Council awarded a contract to Urban Alchemy to manage one of their largest shelters.

This was despite concerns raised by local service providers of their lack of expertise and their controversies in California.

The ordinance awarding the contract passed with two



Lena Miller, the CEO, has also repeatedly said in interviews with media Urban Alchemy is not security. At the same, time emails with City Officials and even some of their contracts use these words when describing the services they are contracted for.

Despite their defiance, multiple private security experts have gone on the record saying Urban Alchemy meets the legal definition of private security.

Under normal circumstances, as a private security company, Urban Alchemy would be required under California law to undergo an extensive licensing process for all of their employees including training as well as background checks through the FBI.

San Francisco also has a city ordinance requiring all security guards to register with the city; although evidence suggests this ordinance is not often enforced.

Urban Alchemy's training is questionable at best. According to Knock LA's investigation most of their training materials are based in New Age philosophy.

The training also preaches de-escalation tactics but does little to train employees on how to actually use those tactics. The training suggests they call the police.

It's no secret Urban Alchemy works with police and the fine between security and not security remains unclear.

San Francisco's current mayor, London Breed, does not shy away from expressing her support for Urban Alchemy nor her disdain for the unhoused community.

Almost all of the contracts Urban Alchemy has received in San Francisco have been 'no-bid' contracts. This means the contracts were awarded without the City issuing a Request for Proposal, allowing other entities to apply for the contracts.

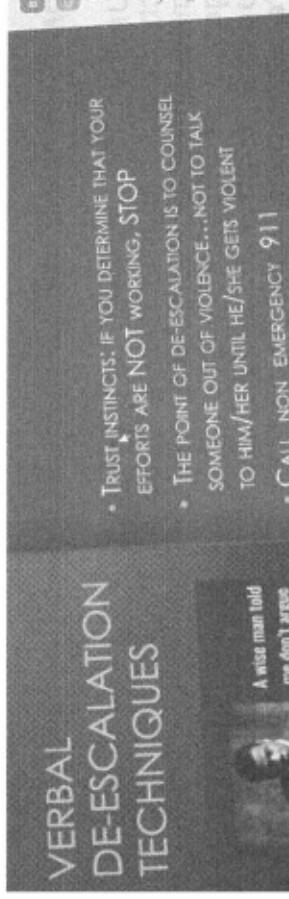
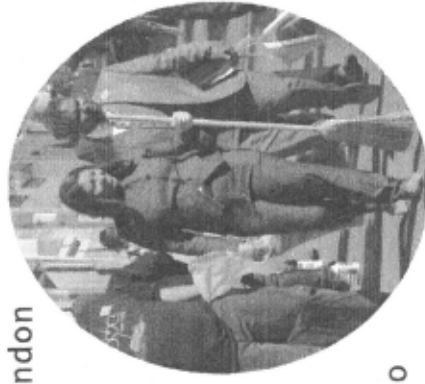
Starting in 2019, Mayor London Breed started using an ordinance which allows no bid contracts for the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing.

In August 2021, London Breed awarded an \$8.8 million contract to Urban Alchemy as part of her Mid-Market Vibrancy and Safety Plan. This time, instead of managing hygiene facilities or shelters, Urban Alchemy would station 'ambassadors' to patrol every block of the district.

In late 2021, London Breed issued a state of emergency in the Tenderloin District, fear-mongering about homelessness, crime, and dirty streets. She used this declaration to expand upon the contract she awarded earlier that year for Mid Market.

In October 2022, London Breed once again expanded upon this contract, announcing the creation of 150 new ambassador positions. And not just for the sidewalks, ambassadors will also be stationed at BART station throughout the district.

Urban Alchemy reported in 2022 that their operating budget is \$43 million of which \$41 million are from contract services. This includes a recent \$18.7 million contract awarded in February 2022 to oversee a 250-



Urban Alchemy wreaks havoc in Los Angeles

Urban Alchemy ultimately made its way to Los Angeles in 2019, launching Pit Stop in the heart of Skid Row. The program was met with mixed reactions.

In December 2020, Los Angeles contracted Urban Alchemy at Echo Park Lake for \$350,000. A community of unhoused people were living in the park, having called the place home for the past eighteen months.

The City was fast-tracking efforts to remove them.

Urban Alchemy was tasked with doing 'outreach'. The outreach consisted of coercive referrals to shelter and services given under the pretense that they would eventually be forced out. They also conducted tent counts and reported the information to Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD).

In March 2021, with roughly 15-20 residents remaining, a massive two day raid of Echo Park Lake unfolded. Residents and community members fought back, resulting in dozens of arrests and injuries by LAPD.

City workers spared no time erecting a fence surrounding the entire perimeter of the park once it was cleared out. Urban Alchemy was in charge of patrolling the park and maintaining the fence during the aftermath of the raid.



Security or Not Security? That is the question

Much of what has been described about Urban Alchemy throughout this zine would probably lead you to believe they are a private security company.

Urban Alchemy uses legal loopholes, such as registering as a nonprofit, to avoid being labeled as security, thus they are not subject to oversight and licensing requirements most private security officers are subject to.

Despite claiming to not be security guards, legally speaking, that sure hasn't stopped workers from calling themselves one as was revealed during an undercover investigation conducted by Knock LA:

[REDACTED] - Security Guard - Urban Alchemy | LinkedIn

[REDACTED] California, United States · Security Guard ·

Urban Alchemy

[REDACTED] California, United States |

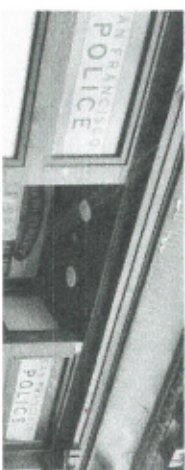
Security Guard at Urban Alchemy | 11 connections | View

[REDACTED] profile, activity, articles.

For their undercover investigation a journalist with Knock LA applied for a job at Urban Alchemy and underwent training as an ambassador. At one point, the employee training them was quoted saying:

“We may look like security, but we’re not security”

Under California law, charities “organized and maintained for the public good” are not subject to private security licensing requirements. Urban



Legal trouble: Urban Alchemy gets served

The exploitative labor practices of Urban Alchemy have come under legal fire in recent years.

Urban Alchemy was subject to their first class action lawsuit in December 2020; Neuttall v. Urban Alchemy alleged several labor violations including wage theft, failure to provide required meals and rest breaks, among many others.

Another class action lawsuit was filed in August 2021 on similar grounds, Reyes v. Urban Alchemy

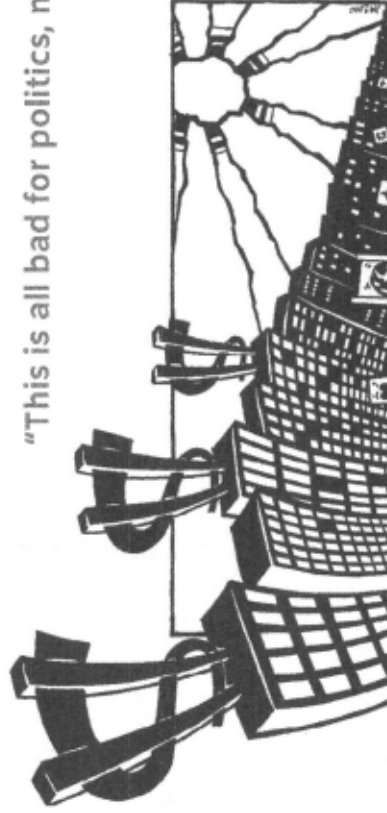
Urban Alchemy has also been subject to a class action lawsuit for civil rights violations.

Strickland v. Urban Alchemy, filed in October 2021, was filed by a transgender woman, who earlier had been feeding birds in a public park and praying.

An Urban Alchemy ambassador asked her to leave, with no lawful basis other than she was allegedly "scaring people". The ambassador continuously misgendered her. Eventually he called the cops who also asked her to leave.

In the court documents, the Urban Alchemy ambassador allegedly told his coworker on the phone:

"This is all bad for politics, man."



Urban Alchemy helped extensively with their media campaign spreading false claims of putting over 100 people into housing. In reality, according to a report from the UCLA Luskin Institute, of the 183 people who were placed on a housing list only 17 people were placed in housing. Of those 17, only 5 people were placed in permanent housing.



Urban Alchemy
@UrbanAlchemyLA

166 people got housing today. Great day #EchoParkLake #resources and wraparound services for our community family.

Shortly after the raid, a motion was introduced by City Councilors to dissolve LA

Homeless Services Authority, a City and County agency, and replace them with Urban

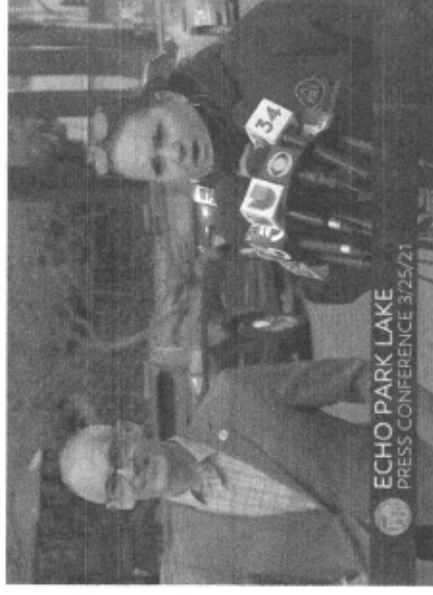
Alchemy. Although the motion failed it still acted as an alarming indicator of the City's shift towards even more privatization of public services.

LA awarded Urban Alchemy several contracts to manage sanctioned encampments across the city, including one worth \$1.1 million.

They received \$2.6 million to manage the CIRCLE pilot program, a crisis response team dispatched through 911.

On top of that, they received \$400,000 for outreach services in Hollywood and Venice over four months and \$1.7 million for a year of 'Skid Row Cleaning'.

Since the Echo Park Lake displacement and subsequent expansion of their contract services and funding. Urban



Exploitation is the name of the game

One of the foundations of Urban Alchemy is hiring people who are recently released from prison or recently off the streets. This is not a new idea but rather built off similar programs that have become increasingly common since the advent of neoliberalism in the early 1980s, a time of increased privatization and public-private partnerships.

Despite the stated intentions of these programs, to provide job opportunities to under-served communities, they are often used to justify exploitative labor practices under the guise of being philanthropic.

Local municipalities will outsource what are normally public sector jobs to private contractors. Many of the workers are not unionized, they are not paid a living wage, nor do they receive the same benefits of other public employees, such as health insurance.

**Statistics only tell
half the story. Our
people tell the rest.**

1189
Urban Alchemy Practitioners

The 'rest of the story' Urban Alchemy doesn't want you to hear:

When they brought the program down here to LA, rather than using parolees, they were using people who were coming out of the county jails, who didn't have guaranteed housing, didn't have that extensive training that the parolees got.

And they were even hiring people who were homeless on the street and paying them the same seventeen bucks

Programs like these are common in Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). These districts contract with local municipalities to provide public space services such as street cleaning and security.

It should come as no surprise Urban Alchemy has contracted directly with BIDs for security and cleaning services, including the Tenderloin Community Benefit District in San Francisco.

Despite the exploitative nature of many of these programs, we cannot blame people for wanting to take part in them, and we shouldn't be surprised many people who take these jobs express gratitude. There are numerous reasons people take these job opportunities. Part of the malice behind these programs is the tendency to pit poor people against each other despite experiencing similar hardships.

Organizations led by and for unhoused people have created dignified alternatives, however. Ground Score Association in Portland, Oregon hires people picking up trash and recycling and working on environmental projects. All while receiving a living wage. Ground Score was created in 2019 with the support from another local organization Trash 4 Peace.

Grassroots, peer led initiatives, like that of Ground Score, recognize the need for these opportunities.

The key difference is they ensure the initiatives are rooted in community and not exploitative.



Despite their claims to the contrary, Urban Alchemy is the antithesis of dignified employment opportunities for people who are experiencing homelessness.

Instead the money is

City Council Meeting - Wednesday, April 19, 2023 9:30 a.m.

Agenda No.	First Name	Last Name
309-01	Kaitlyn	Dey
309-02	Keeley	Higgins
309-03	Sanga	Mbaklene
309-04	Tim	McCormick
309-05	David	Bikman
309-06	Andrew	Olshin
309-07	Rhea	Hannon
309-08	Molly	Hogan
309-09	benjamin	d
309-10	Emily	Boyer