



CLEANUPS OF HOMELESS CAMPS:

Improved Communications and
Data Needed



March 2019



PORTLAND
CITY AUDITOR

Audit Services



Mary Hull Caballero, City Auditor
Kari Guy, Audit Services Director

Audit Team

Kristine Adams-Wannberg, Performance Auditor II
Minh Dan Vuong, Performance Auditor II

Cleanups of Homeless Camps:

Improved Communications and Data Needed

Summary

Portland created a program in 2015 to address some of the impacts of people living in tents and other makeshift shelters on City property. The Homelessness/Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program takes complaints, assesses campsite conditions, and removes trash, but its cleanups sometimes displace people from camp sites.

The program has had some success. Cleanups have improved living conditions for people in camps, and the program has made it easier for the public to report camps.

Improvements are needed, however, in communicating about cleanups and using data to manage the program. What started as a temporary response to people living outside has evolved into a program spending more than \$3.6 million annually. Demand for services has pushed the program past its capacity. Its reliance on email, forms, and separate spreadsheets should give way to a comprehensive data system to enable complaint tracking, status updates, risk assessments, and cleanup prioritization. The program also should improve communication with the community, both people reporting the camps to the City and those living in the camps. The City should also ensure property it takes from people experiencing homelessness is protected when it is in the City's possession.

We make recommendations to improve the program's public information, data, and internal policies.

Background

People sleeping on sidewalks and in parks and cars have become a frequent sight in Portland. For context, in February 2017, about 1,700 people were counted among the unsheltered, according to an official snapshot.

The City and other service providers have struggled to meet the demand for shelter beds and affordable housing units. Despite being prohibited by Code, the City has allowed tent camping in some situations on City-owned property while it works with other governments to develop housing.

The Homelessness/Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program responds to health and safety issues related to camps on City land. The program:

- Takes complaints about campsites. This is also known as the City's One Point of Contact reporting system.
- Prioritizes cleanups where camps are accumulating more trash, are becoming less safe, or more people are living in a location.
- Sends crews under contract with the City to perform light trash pick-up, assess conditions, and/or conduct more extensive cleanups at the locations that need it. Light trash pickup does not displace people, but more extensive cleanups require people to leave the site.
- Stores personal property taken during cleanups for 30 days, which is required by terms of a legal settlement.

The program does not provide shelter or social services to people affected by camp cleanups, but it notifies social service providers of planned cleanups. It also coordinates its activities with the Joint Office of Homeless Services, which was funded by the City and Multnomah County in response to the housing emergency.

Audit Results

The purpose of this audit was to determine if the program cleaned up campsites well, if contracted crews were respectful to people living in the camps, and whether the program was responsive to community complaints. We also assessed its timeliness, prioritization of riskier sites, and compliance with legal requirements.

We found that the program improved conditions for people in and near the campsites, and we observed crews engaging with people respectfully. While legal requirements for giving notice about upcoming cleanups were met, people living in the camps wanted more information about when clean-ups would occur and were frustrated by difficulties getting their property back.

We found people who submitted a complaint to the City were pleased with the ease of filing a report, but their expectations for status information were not met.

We also found that the program's informal management and manual processes have been overwhelmed by the growing volume of complaints and cleanups. The City could not show that higher-risk homeless camp sites were cleaned because of incomplete complaint tracking and inconsistent site assessments. In addition, methods to collect and store property from camps were inconsistent.

City needs to provide better information to people in camps

We found that the program improves public health, safety, and living conditions in and around the camps. In Fiscal Year 2017-18, the program estimated it removed 2.6 million pounds of garbage from campsites.

Although experiences varied, most people interviewed in the camps said the crews were respectful and explained what was happening when they posted the notice and came back to clean up. People forced to move from a site were unhappy about the disruption but understood the need to clean the area.

I've interacted with the crews... and they are helpful...

– Ted, an individual experiencing homelessness

**Before
cleanup**



**After
cleanup**



Underneath SW Jefferson St off-ramp, August 31, 2018

People living in camps wanted more specific information on when the cleanups would occur. We observed the crews post legal notices of approaching cleanups appropriately, but they often get torn down, leaving people in camps not knowing exactly when a cleanup would happen. At the time of our audit, the window during which a cleanup could occur was within seven days once notice was posted. This lengthy period left people in the camps unsure and anxious about when exactly they needed to pack up. It also increased the chance that they might be gone during the cleanup and lose their property.

After our audit, the program extended the cleanup window to 10 days to match requirements with state-owned land. While these time frames, which appear on the notice, comply with legal requirements, there is nothing that prevents the City from giving more precise information about when a cleanup will occur. Program staff said providing more specific information would be difficult, because workload and location priorities can change quickly.



Notice of upcoming cleanup

More specific information and more durable notices, however, could help campers keep the property they need to survive outdoors.

People living in the camps suggested other ways the City could help them. Ideas included placing large trash bins near campsites, providing portable toilets, and locating temporary storage on the eastside of the Willamette River.

City needs to do more to protect property of people who experience homelessness

Retrieving personal property after cleanup crews have moved it to the City's storage site is a source of frustration for some people in the camps. As part of a lawsuit settlement, the City agreed in 2012 to inventory and store personal property for 30 days after a clean-up, so it could be retrieved.

It is a matter of fairness that personal property be returned to its owners, if claimed. Particularly for this vulnerable population, property includes things that help people survive, such as a tent that provides shelter or a laptop that helps earn income. Weak or non-existing policies to guide what personal property should be preserved and procedures for storage can leave collected belongings vulnerable to loss, tampering, or theft.

People experiencing homelessness said it was challenging to get their property back after crews collected it. They said it takes time for the crews to coordinate and locate property for return. In some cases, the property owners gave up trying and lost their property. They also feared leaving their new campsite to travel to the storage facility, because items at their new campsite might be stolen.

The program provides some guidance to crews on what items should be retained in storage for property owners to retrieve after a cleanup. Cleanup crews said few people contacted them to get their property back.

I've lost my property 17 times...

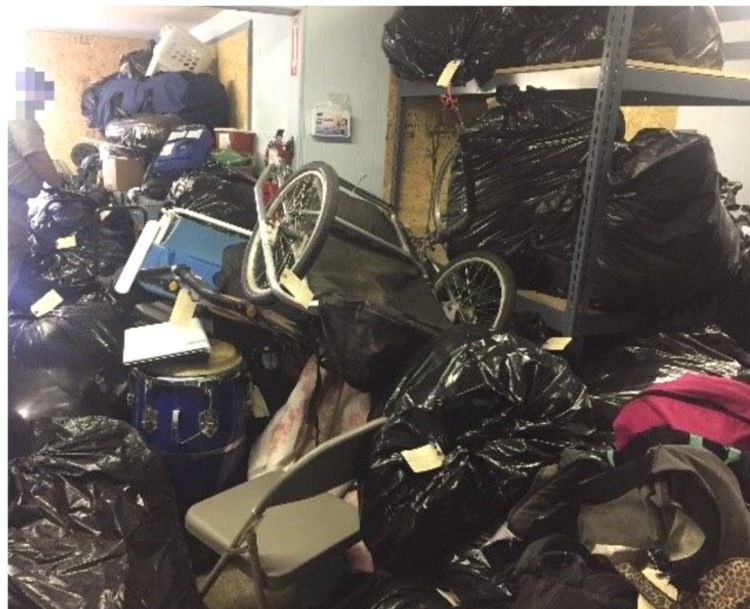
– Scott, an individual experiencing homelessness

An effective property management system would have clear guidelines for what items should be collected during a cleanup, as well as procedures for tracking inventory and property storage.

We found some policies and procedures were not well documented. As an example, there were no procedures for some high-risk items, such as identification cards, credit cards, and prescription medication. Current practice was to keep them with the other property collected, but because of their sensitivity, these items should be handled separately and given stronger oversight. Identifications and credit cards, in particular, should be retained, rather than thrown out after 30 days.

Without better guidance, cleanup crews are left to decide what should be retained or thrown away. We observed differences among crews in what property they retained for storage and what they disposed of. Some people who experienced homelessness said the City had inappropriately taken their property and thrown it away.

The City's two storage buildings had insufficient capacity for property collected during cleanups. As the photograph shows, one building was in disarray, making it somewhat difficult for staff to locate people's property. After our audit, the City replaced the two buildings with a larger, more centrally located warehouse in Southeast Portland.



Property stored in the SW Barbur Blvd facility

City needs to provide more specific communication about complaint status

People who file a complaint about a camp expected the City to tell them if, and when, a cleanup will occur.

We surveyed people who had complained about camps to the City. Most respondents said they felt positive about the ease of submitting a report about a campsite. Whereas people previously had multiple bureaus to call, the streamlined, centralized intake process was viewed as an improvement.

I would like to have the City respond within two days. Typically, it takes more than a week to clear the camps.

– Survey respondent

People who reported a camp and expected a cleanup were dissatisfied when the response was slow or lacking. About 37 percent of respondents said their complaint was not addressed.

People wanted more information about what the City was doing with their reports. About 80 percent said that status updates were important. People often submitted reports about the same location, multiple times. They would like to have a timelier response to their reports and may not submit as often if they knew what was happening. Status updates would better connect people who filed a report with the City's actions.

Let people know the report was received and give them updates on how it is being handled, so they can feel heard and safe.

– Survey respondent

The program is caught between opposing expectations. Many people who complained about the camps simply wanted the camps and trash removed, and a few wanted the people staying in camps arrested and punished. Some said the City was not doing enough. Others, including some people who have experienced homelessness and their advocates, criticized the City's cleanups as traumatizing the people in the camps and would rather see long-term solutions and social services. Some viewed the program as a form of harassment.

The City does not have a good system to track complaints from initiation to cleanup

The program's workload has increased since 2015, but it varies from week to week. For example, in 2018 there were some weeks with as many as 700 or as few as 200 complaints.

We could not compare campsites' risk factors or their priority for cleanup because the program did not have a comprehensive database to track complaints and actions taken through the entire process, but instead relied on a mix of e-mails, forms, and separate spreadsheets.

We reviewed a week of complaints to determine how they were addressed. During the week of June 4 to June 10, 2018, the program received 680 complaints. Most were about campsites, and some were about people sleeping in cars. This figure includes multiple reports about the same location. We found:

- The program sent assessment crews to visit the location of 270 of complaints (40 percent of 680 complaints received).
- The program forwarded 167 complaints (25 percent) to other agencies. Almost all went to the Oregon Department of Transportation for sites on state land. In 2019, after our audit, the City began to clean up some state-owned land.
- For the remaining 243 complaints (36 percent), we did not find assessment records or evidence of action. Example 1 shows three complaints, for which there was no apparent City response. Program staff suggested some of these complaints may overlap with sites they already assessed.
- During the following week, cleanup crews cleared 21 locations. We were unable to calculate the timeliness of cleanups compared to the initial complaint, because there was no way to track a single complaint through the system.
- An additional seven sites were listed in the clean-up log, but we did not find photo documentation to substantiate that a clean-up had happened.
- We were unable to connect most cleanups to preceding assessments and complaints because of those same data limitations.

Example 1: Multiple complaints result in no apparent City action
(Pittman Addition Hydro Park, North Going Street)

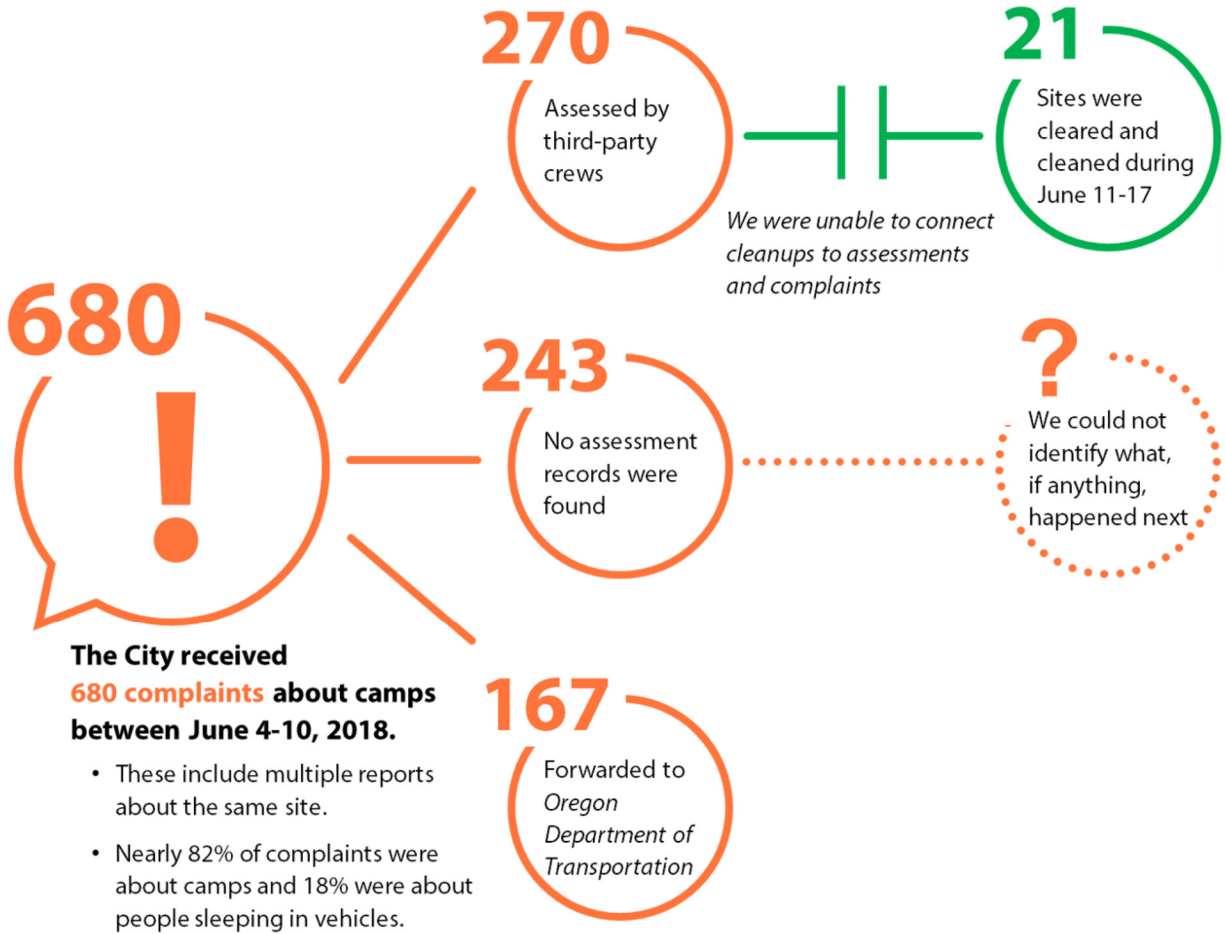
On May 29, 2018, a community member reported a tent in the middle of Pittman Addition Hydro Park to the camp cleanup program.

On the same day, a caller reported campsite activity on the northside of North Going Street, near North Interstate Avenue, which could have been the same campsite.

On June 8, a person affiliated with a business in the area reported: "People are present at all hours. Harass customers. Break into our hose to use for showers."

Our review of program records did not show any assessment or cleanup at this location. Without an assessment, program staff cannot make informed decisions about whether to schedule a cleanup, or not.

Many complaints did not result in a site clean-up



**Assessment
criteria need
clarification**

The program may not be identifying the camps that are the highest priority to clean because of unclear assessment criteria and inconsistent scoring and documentation. The assessment crews have a list of risk factors they document and score for each campsite they visit. Some of these include the amount of trash, size of the camp, evidence of drug use, and whether a pathway is blocked, as shown in Example 2. We found that:

- Contractors did not always support assessments of high-risk sites with photographs.
- Scoring was often done by a contractor’s supervisor in the office, based on a brief record of observations by crews in the field, rather than the direct observer of the conditions.
- Some risk categories, such as restricting accessibility and blocking public access, overlapped and were unclear and resulted in inconsistent scoring.

**Example 2: Campsite was assessed, but not prioritized for a cleanup
(SE Powell Blvd and 123rd Avenue)**

A complainant reported in early June 2018 that the camp was blocking the sidewalk and driveway to a church, that people in the camp were aggressive toward elderly pedestrians and were using and selling drugs.

Another person reported the same site five days later: “This camp is continuing to grow larger each week... They’ve blocked the sidewalk completely, causing people to walk in the street. We would appreciate any help we could get on this matter.”

The City sent out an assessment crew. The next day, the crew found two tents, two tarps, and scattered debris. The crew also noted environmental issues and blocked access routes and removed three bags of trash. It reported results to the City almost immediately.



The assessment results were at the threshold at which a cleanup would be performed. Our review of program records did not show any cleanup during the following week. Program staff said they cleaned up the site in July and August.

Program is not monitoring timeliness

One of the program’s goals is to clean campsites as quickly as possible. It set a response-time goal of two to seven days after receiving a complaint. The program has not tracked results.

For example, during the week of June 4, 2018, the City received 680 complaints and it cleaned up 21 sites during the following week of June 11. We were unable to determine if the 21 sites cleaned stemmed from these 680 complaints, or even earlier complaints or other origins. We did not determine if any of the 680 sites were cleaned more than two weeks later, after June 18.

Because the program did not track the timeliness of its responses to campsites, we surveyed a sample of people who reported campsites. Based on the survey, we estimate that one fifth to one half of City responses took a week or longer to materialize.

Example 3 describes how multiple complaints did not result in action until the following week. People who make complaints about campsites expect a timely response, and program managers also need timeliness data to determine if the program is meeting goals and to steer their limited resources. Many of the limitations we found in tracking complaints, prioritizing cleanups, and ensuring timely responses were rooted in technology systems that were too basic for how the program has evolved. Staff relied on largely manual processes to review incoming complaints, manage assessments, and manage cleanups. The program did not have a customer relationship management system or dispatch system that matched its volume of complaints per week.

Example 3: Numerous complaints led to an assessment and cleanup, but the process took almost two weeks
(SE Ankeny St and 23rd Ave)

Several people reported a campsite on the sidewalk on three separate days in late May 2018.

The program reportedly asked a crew to clean up the site, but it was unclear if anyone visited the location to assess the camp. The crew posted a cleanup notice at the camp on June 4.

The next day, several people reported “screaming all night,” arguing, and a fire.

Another complainant told the City that people would “take the law into their own hands,” if the City did not take “drastic and quick measures to remove this homeless filth” from the streets.

The next day, the assessment crew found four tents with carts blocking the sidewalks. Later that day, a cleanup crew cleared the area.

Recommendations

We recommend the Homelessness/Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program:

1. Improve communication to people experiencing homelessness about when crews will most likely clear the camp, and improve the durability of the notices.
2. Ensure that contractors have a common understanding of what the City considers personal property.
3. Ensure that contractors improve storage policies and procedures, including extra safeguards for sensitive property.
4. Give people filing a complaint status updates.
5. Establish data systems and procedures that improve data quality and reduce manual processes, such as by assigning unique identification numbers to assessments and automating the workflow.
6. Use data to analyze and improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and timeliness of cleanups.
7. Clarify the assessment risk factors and scoring, identify what risk factors require photographic documentation, and establish a common understanding of the criteria among the crews who carry out the assessments.

**Objective,
Scope,
and
Methodology**

Our audit objectives were to determine whether the City's Homelessness/Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program's approach to cleanups reduced impacts on the community, if the program was meeting legal requirements, and if the crews were respectful to people experiencing homelessness during the cleanups.

This audit did not evaluate responses by law enforcement or parking enforcement officers, the City's Housing Bureau, or the Joint Office of Homeless Services. Our fieldwork ended in early November 2018.

To accomplish our audit objectives, we:

- Reviewed background and budget information about the program.
- Interviewed managers and staff from the cleanup program, and staff other City bureaus that address homelessness issues and the Joint Office of Homeless Services.
- Interviewed service providers and advocates for people experiencing homelessness.
- Conducted four field observations during August and September 2018 of City contractors providing cleanup, assessment, and storage services. During site visits, we interviewed crew members and people living in the camps.
- Reviewed a sample of complaint and cleanup documents, tracing the complaints and cleanups through the process phases to identify issues with the process, timing of notice, results, and data quality.
- Evaluated site assessments performed by the contractor against the City's criteria; examined assessment scores for consistency and against photographic evidence.
- Conducted a survey of complainants about their experience with the program. The survey was emailed to 502 complainants from 5/28/18 to 6/10/18. We received 309 responses, for a 62 percent response rate.
- Assessed procedures for storing and disposing property taken during cleanups.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

RESPONSE TO THE AUDIT



Tom Rinehart
Chief Administrative
Officer

Ted Wheeler
Mayor

CITY OF PORTLAND
**Office of Management
and Finance**
1120 SW 5th Avenue
Portland, OR 97204

P: (503) 823-1182
F: (503) 823-5384
TTY: (503) 823-6868
portlandoregon.gov/omf

Date: March 13, 2019

To: Mary Hull Caballero, City Auditor

From: Tom Rinehart, Chief Administrative Officer
Mayor Ted Wheeler, Commissioner-in-Charge

Re: Cleanups of Homeless Camps: Improved Communications and Data Needed

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Cleanups of Homeless Camps Audit report. The report makes seven recommendations to the Homelessness/Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program (HUCIRP). We appreciate the process improvements that have been identified. We are pleased to tell you that many of the recommendations suggested are processes the program has begun to implement since your office began this audit. Prior to 2018, HUCIRP's funding came solely from its customer bureaus (BES, PBOT, PP&R, and PWB) to respond to campsite cleanups. Beginning in July 2018, roughly a third (\$1M) of HUCIRP's budget came from on-going General Funds, thus allowing the program to invest in program and process improvements. Fiscal Year 2018-19, was the first year when HUCIRP had a sustainable funding model allowing it to strategically plan its work.

To address your office's recommendations:

1. Improve communication to people experiencing homelessness about when crews will most likely clear the camp and improve the durability of the notices.

HUCIRP agrees with the importance of this recommendation and works with its partner agencies to help ensure that individuals experiencing homelessness have all the information available about when crews are coming and how to retrieve personal property taken during a cleanup. Once a campsite is posted, HUCIRP notifies social service providers so that they can begin outreach. HUCIRP discusses cleanup locations with regional providers via weekly campsite reports and during weekly service coordination calls.

Occasionally, situations arise that inhibit the program's ability to respond to locations on a specified date as circumstances can change (inclement weather, for example) rapidly in the field. However, the program is pursuing opportunities to improve its communication to individuals experiencing homelessness so that they have a full understanding of when to expect cleanup crews. One method we are implementing is distributing business cards with information that a cleanup will be occurring, and instructions and contact information for retrieving any personal property collected. To address the durability of the notices, HUCIRP notices are printed on heavy card stock and, when it is wet, the notices are placed in a reusable plastic sleeve.



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2. Ensure that contractors have a common understanding of what the City considers personal property.

HUCIRP agrees with this recommendation and will work with vendors to achieve more uniformity and clarity regarding expected policies and procedures. Though we have listed items that cannot be stored and the mandatory storage policy on the homelessness toolkit website, there are still inconsistencies in how these policies are implemented in the field. Contractors are expected to take pictures of everything at the site, including items that are not deemed to be of reasonable value and/or utility. The program continues to work with contractors to ensure that personal property is not mistakenly thrown away.

3. Ensure that contractors improve storage policies and procedures, including extra safeguards for sensitive property.

HUCIRP will work with contractors to provide extra safeguards for sensitive property, including storing identification and credit cards separately from other property, and by transferring those items to the Police Bureau following the 30-day storage period.

The new leased storage facility is more centrally located and has more space to sort and store property collected following cleanups (see picture below). The larger facility also helps improve inventory tracking. The City will conduct quarterly trainings with contractors ensuring clarity and consistency on what items should be retained in storage for property owners to retrieve following cleanup.



4. Give people filing a complaint status updates.

HUCIRP makes every effort to contact community members that are looking for status updates or for general information about the program. However, HUCIRP receives hundreds of requests each week, which makes providing a status update to everyone who filed a campsite report challenging. Recognizing

that this is an important issue, HUCIRP has been working with the Bureau of Technology Services (BTS) on a workflow and data management system that will allow for real time status updates notifying community members of the status of their complaint (Exhibit A). The public-facing portion of this system is scheduled to go live by July 2019.

5. Establish data systems and procedures that improve data quality and reduce manual processes, such as by assigning unique identification numbers to assessments and automating the workflow.

The workflow and data management system mentioned above will improve data quality and reduce manual processes. It will also reduce the number of duplicate reports received about any given location by geo-tagging the location with one incident number. This will allow program administrators to track complaints and assessments. It will also automate workflow, thus freeing up staff time for other work assignments.

6. Use data to analyze and improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and timeliness of cleanups.

Again, with the creation of the new workflow and data management system with BTS, HUCIRP will be better suited to track complaints from start to finish. Staff can track in real time where crews are headed and whether or not they have started or finished a site.

7. Clarify the assessment risk factors and scoring, identify what risk factors require photographic documentation, and establish a common understanding of the criteria among the crews who carry out the assessments.

The risk assessment matrix was developed in collaboration with our internal customer bureaus and discussed with A Home for Everyone's "Safety Off the Streets" workgroup. HUCIRP staff will continue to work with our contractors to improve consistency with the risk assessment and scoring process. Additionally, contractors have been advised to take pictures of the locations to which they are dispatched, as well as photographing everything there.

We appreciate your office's work to help HUCIRP improve its program on behalf of the City of Portland. The objective lens with which your office examines City services provides the public and our programs valuable insights and feedback. We would like to specifically thank your staff who observed City vendors' interactions with individuals experiencing homelessness, and for reporting that those interactions were respectful.

Thank you for this opportunity to describe how HUCIRP is working to provide a safe and clean community for all Portlanders.

Sincerely,



Tom Rinehart, CAO

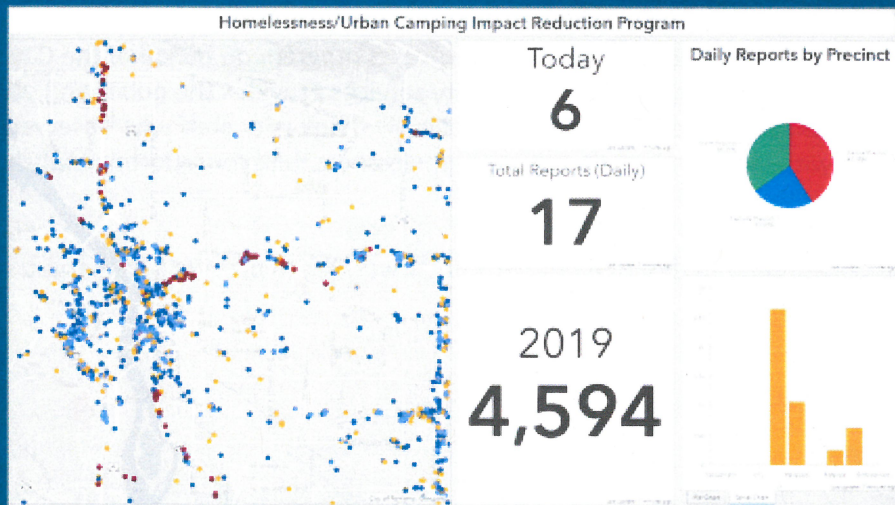


Mayor Ted Wheeler

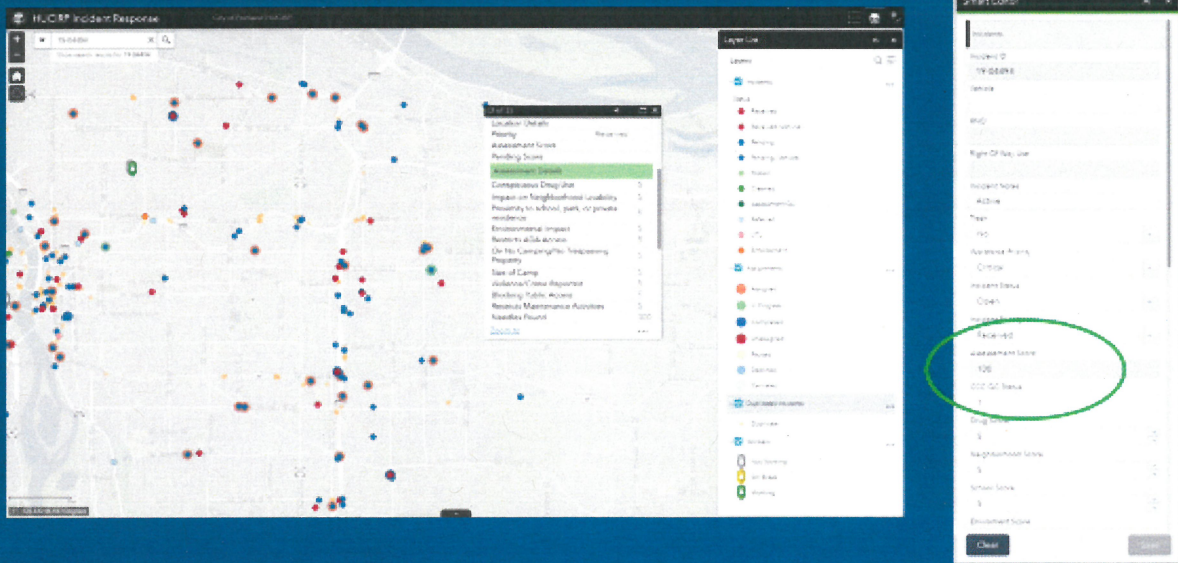
Homelessness and Urban Camping Impact Reduction

Incident Support

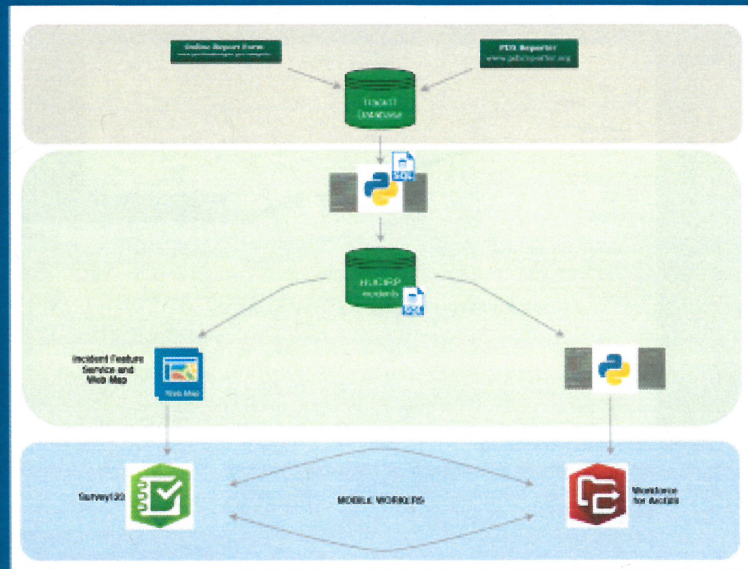
Access to Real-Time Data



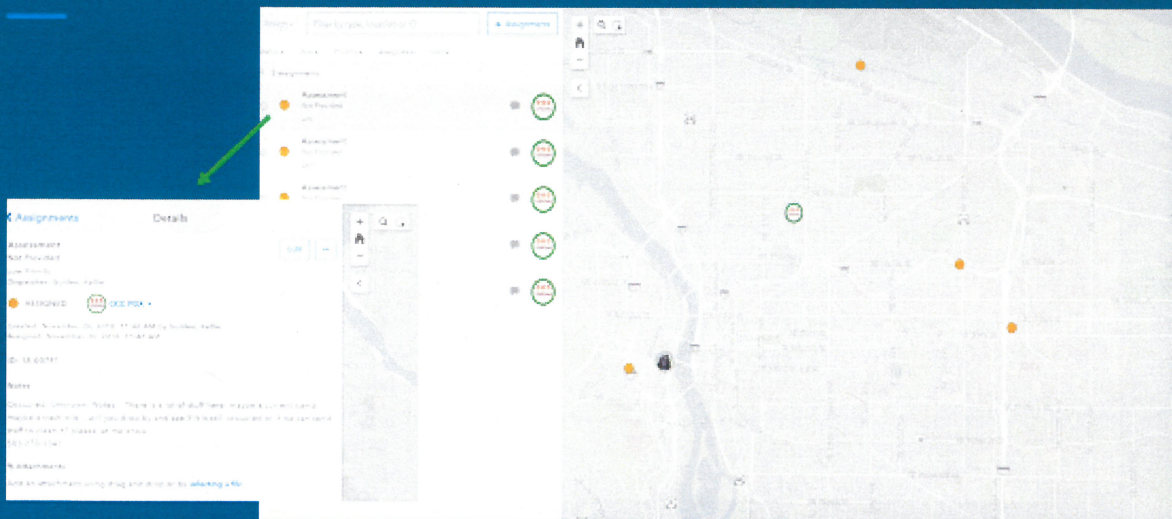
Incident - Details



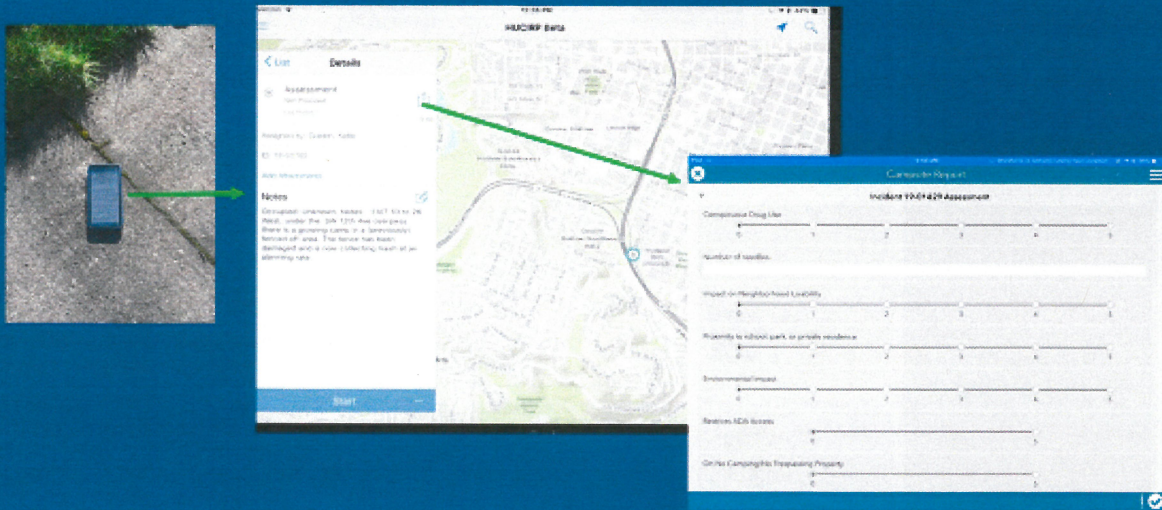
Data Workflow



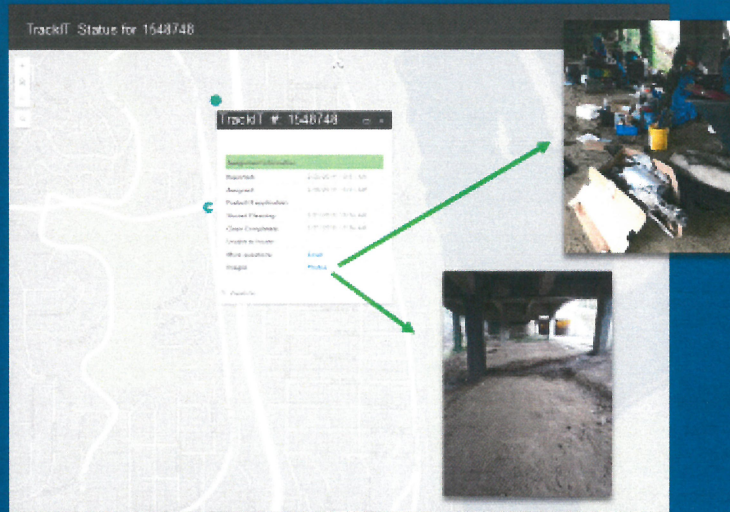
Operations Map for Contract Workers



Mobile App Solution



Public View for Status Updates





P O R T L A N D
CITY AUDITOR
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Data Needed

Report #491, March 2019

Audit Team: Kristine Adams-Wannberg,
Minh Dan Vuong

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