



City of Seattle

Seattle
LGBTQ Commission

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To: Seattle City Council, Mayor Jenny Durkan
Cc: Jason Johnson, Interim Director of HSD
Subject: Concern Regarding Encampment Removal Policies

July 23, 2019

Honorable Councilmembers and Mayor,

We are writing you today to express our concerns about the increase in encampment removals, particularly those where residents are not given prior notice (referred to as “unannounced removals”). Per reporting from Erica C Barnett¹²³⁴ and the Seattle Times⁵⁶, and per the city’s own reports on encampment removals, there has been a troubling increase in encampment removals having declared rationales of obstructions, which the city has exempted from the typical notice and outreach requirements⁷ for encampment removals. CM Herbold has raised some of these concerns in committee, but there is currently no indication that HSD will change their policies.

As this Commission has written before⁸, we are concerned about the policy of encampment removals in general. We are familiar with problems that can arise due to the presence of unsanctioned encampments: a lack of sanitation and hygiene facilities can cause public health issues, encampment locations can be prone to mudslides or other precarious situations, and obstructions to sidewalks can cause both accessibility issues for those using mobility aids as well as safety issues for pedestrians who may e.g. walk in the street to avoid obstructions. Our concern is not due to a lack of agreement that these issues must be dealt with, but instead is due to the fact that the tactic of encampment removals neither solves any of these issues in a meaningful way nor preserves human dignity and civil rights.

The current policy of encampment removals does nothing to solve the underlying issues that lead to homelessness, and instead this escalation seems to be a way to make it *appear* that the city is taking action versus gathering the political will to raise revenue to support real change.

The city’s homeless population is among the most vulnerable groups in the city, and is disproportionately composed of members of marginalized groups including LGBTQ+ individuals, racial and ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities. We already have a shortage of shelter beds, but additional barriers often exist against these individuals attempting to access that shelter. While there is a Statement of Legislative Intent by CM Herbold in support of

lowering barriers for LGBTQ+ individuals to access shelter and services, that legislation has not yet been realized. Until there are adequate numbers of safe short-term beds available, there is a significant risk that folks whose tents are confiscated or destroyed in an encampment removal will have even less shelter from the elements than they had before. We cannot continue to leave people worse off while telling them it's for their own good.

In previous conversations, co-chairs from our Commission and the Commission for People with DisAbilities have asked if LGBTQ+ or disabled individuals are more likely to refuse outreach attempts from the Navigation team due to the increased barriers they face; we would ask again that HSD looks into answering this question, as it has implications for those most likely to be impacted by increased encampment removals, especially when there is no advanced notice provided. We have also asked about the composition of the Navigation team as it compares to those of other cities. We would also like to know if HSD has any metrics to evaluate as to whether the presence of the Navigation team as it is currently composed leads to more positive outcomes for individuals working with them, especially given the investment in the team working seven days a week.

We also encourage HSD to identify solutions that preserve individuals' rights to privacy, stability, and dignity. In the short term, these may include regular trash pick-ups, mobile hygiene facilities, needle exchange services, or better prevention of non-residents illegally dumping near encampments. In the medium to long term, these solutions will need to include identifying adequate revenue sources to support the shelter and services needed to allow people to get back on their feet.

In summation, the current policy of encampment removals is not a meaningful solution nor a humane solution. It merely pushes vulnerable people to a new location without addressing their needs, leaving them traumatized and worse off. Rather than escalating unannounced removals and asking people to report tents by app, we should be putting funds towards additional safe, low-barrier shelters, hygiene and health services, and programs to help those at risk of falling into homelessness. While this may take more time, money, and political will, it is the only humane course of action.

Sincerely,
The Seattle LGBTQ Commission

Citations and Links:

1. Erica C. Barnett, "Morning Crank: Durkan Talks Up Aggressive Encampment Removal Strategy in North Seattle", *The C is for Crank*, May 7, 2019, <https://thecisforcrank.com/2019/05/07/morning-crank-durkan-talks-up-aggressive-encampment-removal-strategy-in-north-seattle/> (Accessed July 22, 2019).

2. Erica C. Barnett, "City's Outreach Partner Disengages from Navigation Team as City Removes More Encampments Without Notice", *The C is for Crank*, May 20, 2019, <https://thecisforcrank.com/2019/05/20/citys-outreach-partner-splits-from-navigation-team-as-city-removes-more-encampments-without-notice/> (Accessed July 22, 2019).
3. Erica C. Barnett, "More Encampment Removals, Less Notice? Durkan to Make Navigation Team Announcement", *The C is for Crank*, May 30, 2019, <https://thecisforcrank.com/2019/05/30/more-encampment-removals-less-notice-durkan-to-make-navigation-team-announcement/> (Accessed July 22, 2019).
4. Erica C. Barnett, "Morning Crank: City Homelessness Director Resigns, Offers New Explanation for Decrease In 72-Hour Encampment Removals", *The C is for Crank*, June 27, 2019, <https://thecisforcrank.com/2019/06/27/morning-crank-city-homelessness-director-resigns-offers-new-explanation-for-ramp-up-of-obstruction-camp-removals/> (Accessed July 22, 2019).
5. Vianna Davila, "Seattle team in charge of removing homeless camps will gain staff, operate 7 days a week", *Seattle Times*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/seattle-team-in-charge-of-removing-homeless-camps-will-gain-staff-operate-7-days-a-week/> (Accessed July 22, 2019).
6. Daniel Beekman and Sydney Brownstone, "On way to long-term changes, Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan quietly clears homeless camps", *Seattle Times*, July 6, 2019, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/on-way-to-long-term-changes-seattle-mayor-jenny-durkan-quietly-clears-homeless-camps/> (Accessed July 22, 2019).
7. City of Seattle, "Homelessness Response: Unauthorized Encampments", <https://www.seattle.gov/homelessness/unauthorized-encampments> (Accessed July 22, 2019).
8. Seattle LGBTQ Commission, "Recommendations regarding homelessness", *Seattle LGBTQ Commission: What We Do*, Feb 16, 2017* (*misdated on pdf), <http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/LGBT/SLGBTQ-Recommendations-reHomelessness-Letter.pdf> (Accessed July 22, 2019).