

LOCAL NEWS

City plans sweep of homeless camp; unhoused, advocates cry foul

More than 18 people call the park 'home'



By **MELANIE GILBERT** | mgilbert@lowellsun.com

UPDATED: June 26, 2023 at 7:14 AM EDT

LOWELL — Robert Waylein has lived in the so-called Dog Park camp for 10 years. For almost 4,000 nights, he has laid his head down in a shelter he built on land he says he cleaned and has maintained that used to function as an open-air garbage dump.

After Sunday, night, he's not sure where he'll be sleeping.

"They're just displacing us," he said, as he opened a Naloxbox kit that was nailed to a tree at the edge of the encampment, located off First Street Boulevard in Centralville.

He refilled the kit with opioid rescue supplies such as Narcan nasal spray, which can counter the effects of an opioid overdose. The supplies are provided to the residents by the [Lowell Community Opioid Outreach Program](#), a city service run out the Department of Health & Human Services.

"This place was a mess when I first got here in 2013," Waylein said. "I was going fishing one day when I found it. The river cleanup crew saw me and gave me a bunch of bags and stuff."

On June 20, the city posted a “notice to vacate” that deemed the site “uninhabitable.” The notice advised the 18 to 25 residents to leave the site and remove all their belongings.

It noted that “any property left at this site will be removed and disposed of” on Sunday, June 25, at 8 a.m.

The notice was in response to [alleged criminal activity](#) taking place at the camp including weapons and drugs, City Manager Tom Golden said.

“It’s important to note we are cleaning this particular site because of the public health and public safety issues involving weapons and the trafficking of fentanyl and other Class B substances,” Golden said by text on Saturday. “This investigation is still on going so I can not comment further about this.”

Both residents and activists contend that the alleged crimes are a pretext to clean a camp that has long bedeviled the city’s attempts to manage its homeless population, and that no search warrant was actually produced during the search.

“They said there was warrant pending,” Waylein claimed. “They didn’t even show us a warrant, they just came in.”

Other encampments around the city have been the scene of significant crimes. A stabbing took place at the [Kyan Street encampment](#) under the School Street Bridge in February. More recently, a 22-year-old homeless woman was left covered in blood after she was allegedly [stabbed multiple times](#) by another homeless woman in the Back Central neighborhood during the early morning hours on May 30. The area is one of several such locations around the city known for its homeless population.

The city planned and failed to execute two previous sweeps of the Dog Park encampment — in [December](#) and again in [February](#) — due in most part to mobilization by both camp residents and advocates who claimed due notice wasn’t given and no beds were available to rehouse the inhabitants.

Shortly after, the Director of Homeless and Housing Initiatives Maura Fitzpatrick circulated a [draft City of Lowell Homeless Encampment Health and Safety Protocol](#), obtained by The Sun, that seeks to give the city of Lowell authority to sweep homeless encampments without notice.

Attempts to reach Fitzpatrick this weekend to inquire as to whether that draft was being executed prior to City Council approval were not successful.

But Marissa Dupont, of Lowell, and a member of the coordinating committee of Solidarity Lowell, said that although notice was given, the city doesn't have sufficient beds to rehouse the Dog Park residents.

Solidarity Lowell is a volunteer group of community members of Greater Lowell working toward social justice by defending the human rights, dignity and equality of all persons against all forms of hate and discrimination. They joined members of the group LLAMA, which stands for Lifting Lowellians: Assistance and Mutual Aid, who gathered Sunday morning in nonviolent opposition to the anticipated sweep.

"We want these people to have homes," Dupont said. "(The city) says, 'We have four beds' (in Lowell) but that's not 23, and there's no mention of getting them into hotels or anything. They say they are going to get vouchers."

Some of those beds, according to Dupont, are in Worcester.

Golden confirmed the number of beds as 15, although he did not specify all the locations.

"When my team spoke with Lowell Transitional Living Center yesterday, they have five beds available in Lowell, and another 10 available at one of their other locations," he wrote.

A head count by this reporter showed 18 people, of which nine are women, still on site. Waylein said about six people moved to other encampments in anticipation of the removal operation.

Three of the people still on site, sharing a large green tent, were [Caroline Zannoni](#) and her sons, Darren Sturtevant, 28, and Michael Sturtevant, 27.

The senior citizen is disabled, and navigates the rocky and muddy terrain using a transport chair.

"I've been here for a month," she said. "I was in rehab up until then. Beds take time."

It was unclear if the city's plan would keep the family together, or who among the residents of the camp would not receive housing. It was also unclear if the city will allow people to recover their private belongings after they are removed from the encampment in a sweep-type action should the residents fail to vacate the site.

The issue of sweeps, notice, housing, handling of personal effects and more were the focus of a [citizens' petition](#) that was presented to the City Council during its April 11 meeting.

It requested input to the city's decision and policymaking process on the unhoused issue. Advocates met with Golden in May, Dupont said, to "help (the city) work through the issues."

Instead, she said the city is reverting to a method that has not served either the city or the residents of the camps by bringing forth yet another encampment sweep action.

To date, the city has only cleared the Plain Street encampment [in January](#), which launched a [firestorm of protest](#) at the way in which it was conducted.

Soraia, who declined to give her last name, was walking past the protest with her labradoodle, Mocha. She said she owns a hair salon on Andover Street, and lives near the Dog Park.

"I feel so sad for them," she said. "I feel so sorry for them, and I hope the city can make more affordable houses — that's what we need. People can't pay rent."

Her comments were echoed by Lisa, a Centralville homeowner who also declined to give her last name, and whose family came from Guatemala. She said she feels compassion for the unhoused.

"My family came close to being unhoused when I was a little child," she said. "That stays with you. I've been in Lowell 25 years and the unhoused has tripled in the past couple of years. I think it's a housing issue. If you are making it impossible for people to afford rents, I'm surprised that the encampments aren't bigger."

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As of noon Sunday, the city had not showed up to execute the 8 a.m. deadline.

Originally Published: June 25, 2023 at 6:20 PM EDT

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