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# Lowell faces backlash after clearing out small homeless encampment

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Liz Waylein and Robert Waylein stand on a street corner in Lowell on Tuesday, June 27th after their tent was destroyed during a sweep of their encampment.

**Casey Choung / GBH News**

By **Casey Choung**

June 28, 2023

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The city of Lowell tore down a 25-person homeless encampment Monday, highlighting the disconnect between city hall and people experiencing homelessness.

Police accompanied workers operating heavy equipment to tear down the tents and structures that covered the woods behind Centralville Dog Park on Monday morning, just days after officials posted flyers telling encampment residents of the sweep, originally planned for Sunday.

Robert Waylein, founder and member of the camp, said he lost his \$400 tent because residents didn't know when officials would arrive and didn't have time to take out their belongings.

"This is wrong. They literally just uprooted 25 people and sent them into the gutter," he said.



Four garden pots at the site of the former encampment behind the Centralville Dog Park on June 27th

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Since the pandemic, the encampment grew from less than nine people to 25 people. Waylein said members of the camp sign contracts, abide by a set of rules, and pool money for community benefits like barbeques and gardens.

Tom Golden, the city manager of Lowell, said although there are homeless encampments — some of which are larger — in other parts of the city, complaints about drug use in the dog park encampment in particular led to action being taken.

Waylein, who has been at the encampment for over a decade, said the encampment has been relatively safe, and that as one of the respected members of the encampment he did not condone the consumption of narcotics or alcohol in the camp.

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During the clean up, over 100 needles were collected as part of the “detox” service Golden said the city provides when it comes to addressing homelessness. Workers with the Community Opioid Outreach Program, for example, regularly visit encampments in the city to connect people with treatment services.

Golden said the city has adopted a “multipronged approach” to house homeless people, consisting of connecting with loved ones, working with neighboring cities to provide beds, and providing transportation with relocation.



“Our goal is to shelter people, our goal is to get people out of the elements,” Golden said.

Golden added that the city regularly discusses how to support people experiencing homelessness. He said he’s spoken several times with the displaced residents and advocates, but they have not been able to come up with a common solution.

Solidarity Lowell, a local advocacy group, had members posted up with signs outside the encampment on Sunday in protest of the sweep.

Joseph Boyle, a Lowell resident and member of Lowell Solidarity, said he and several others petitioned the city to offer more services at homeless encampments in the past, which yielded minor results.

“The encampments appear to be a target for some local politicians to make big public displays about how tough they’re willing to be against weak people,” Boyle said.



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A pile of debris left behind the Centralville Dog Park in Lowell, Mass., on June 27, 2023, following the clearing of a small homeless encampment in the area.

### **Casey Choung / GBH News**

Opponents have said there are not enough beds for the displaced residents in Lowell. Boyle said the promises the city has made to find shelter for the homeless people is “not reliable.”

Lowell Transitional Living Center, the city’s partnered homeless shelter, operates on a first come, first serve basis, and availability varies day by day, according to a shelter worker.

Marissa Dupont, a member of Lowell Solidarity’s coordinating committee, said there are never enough beds, and the shelter is “perpetually full.”

“It’s musical chairs, they’re just going to keep shuffling them around the city,” Dupont said. “They don’t understand that these people need to stay where the services are ... where their families and their doctors are.”

Waylein and other members of the former encampment have relocated elsewhere in the city, aided by the volunteer group Lifting Lowellians: Assistance and Mutual Aid and members of the COOP team.

“We deserve proper housing, proper shelter, just being treated like a human instead of a plague,” Waylein said.

### **Casey Choung**

Casey Choung is the GBH News and Radio intern for summer 2023.

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