

Albuquerque moves to escalate evictions of homeless campers

D. Lencho
9 February 2015

The city of Albuquerque, New Mexico, has begun measures to clear out a homeless encampment less than a mile southwest of the downtown city hall. The encampment, known as Tent City, sprang up last year when homeless people set up tents alongside a fence on First Street, not far from the city's railyards.

Tent City, which is near a Rescue Mission and several churches where the city's homeless can go for food and limited services, grew to nearly 40 tents by January. The city installed a few portable toilets after getting complaints from residents in the neighborhood, a working-class area of mostly modest houses, but not far from a number of gated condominium and apartment complexes.

City councilmembers, citing complaints from residents and reports from undercover police of illegal activities—including drug use, prostitution and violence—began calling for the removal of the homeless from the area.

A number of advocacy organizations, among them the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness and Albuquerque Homeless Shelters & Services for the Needy, visit the encampment to offer services which barely scratch the surface of the social crisis faced by the city's homeless.

Albuquerque and its surrounding metropolitan region have over 900,000 residents, the most populated city out of a statewide population of a little over two million. Metro Las Cruces, with around 214,000, is a distant second. The number of homeless in Albuquerque has been growing steadily in recent years.

The web site of one organization, St. Martin's Hospitality Center, states, "Over the course of the year, there are as many as 17,000 people who are without homes in New Mexico." Between 12,000 and 15,000 of them are in Albuquerque, where some services exist,

even though they are far from adequate.

The web site also lists facts and figures that point out the dire situation for homeless people in Albuquerque:

- "The MOST proximate cause of homelessness in America is poverty; Albuquerque's poverty level is ranked the fifth highest in the nation
- "Lack of affordable housing is another major contributor to homelessness.
- "Most of the homeless in Albuquerque are long-time New Mexico residents.
- "Twenty percent (1 out of every 5) of New Mexico's residents live below the 2008 poverty level of \$10,400 in annual income.
- "In fact, 46% of jobs with the most growth between the years of 1994 and 2005 pay less than \$16,000 per year.

With the city still feeling the impact of the murder of homeless camper James Boyd less than a year ago (by two Albuquerque Police Department (APD) officers), and its aftermath, the city was cautious at first. On January 23, however, deputy chief administrative officer Gilbert Montano, claiming that a "criminal element" had infiltrated the area, announced that the city would begin the process of removing the campers.

Montano told reporters, "We compassionately care about our homeless population, but public safety certainly comes first in this situation." On February 2, the city announced that it had sent APD officers and social workers with its "Albuquerque Heading Home" initiative to "suggest" that people move out by the next day, offering them food, clothing and ten-day motel vouchers.

By the next day, there were still around 14 remaining tents. Once the vouchers run out, homeless people will have little recourse other than returning to the camp. In fact, other campsites have appeared in other sections of

the city, particularly at parks and under freeway overpasses and bridges.

The city is planning to begin evicting people using “nuisance abatement” orders. Montano said, “We are not going to pull them out, and drag them out and move them along. But we will go through the court process. We will file an eviction notice to get them out of there.” On February 5, a private attorney filed a petition to stop the evictions. The next day, the judge turned down the petition for a temporary restraining order, and the authorities are expected to begin handing out three-day notices to the remaining homeless on February 9.

After removing the remaining occupants of Tent City, the city plans to prevent it being used by homeless campers again by landscaping the area and installing an “Innovation Trail” from the railyards to downtown Albuquerque.



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