

Tucson, Arizona, officials considering banning homeless from downtown park

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City officials in Tucson, Arizona, have delayed a decision on banning urban camping on city streets.

The ban on sleeping in boxes, tents and pods in the city was to be considered at a Tuesday meeting, but was delayed because Councilman Steve Kozachik said his staff needed more time to work on it with service providers and other agencies.

“We have to get an urban camping ban in place, so people can’t have tents and couches and messing up the public rights of way,” said Kozachik. “But let’s also make sure that when a police approaches somebody and identifies the fact that maybe there aren’t services available at a given time, they have an answer.”

A lawsuit against the city for limiting a person’s belongings to a bedroll, backpack and beverage was brought up by activists like John Cooper, who is fighting for a designated area for the homeless in every city ward. “Tucson just needs to think about the constitution when it comes to making these laws,” he said.

Roy Trout was living in the downtown Veinte De Agosto Park in a tent. He told local news about the possible ordinance banning tents or other structures. “It’s another way of sweeping the homeless under the rug,” he said, adding, “The city needs to realize that the homeless need a place to stay. They chase them out of washes, they chase them out of their camps, it’s ridiculous.”

Due to the lack of affordable housing, high unemployment and dwindling social services it has been far easier for city authorities across the US to simply criminalize homelessness. That is why police and city workers were called to clear the encampments from Veinte De Agosto Park in downtown Tucson without telling the more than 70 homeless where to go.

More than two dozen sleeping pods were removed and taken to a nearby church, which served as a temporary shelter for homeless residents. At least 40 people continued to sleep in the park, despite the police telling residents not to obstruct sidewalks or have pods or tents to sleep in. No personal possessions were taken by police and no arrests were made. Park residents were told that any structures that were left behind after 6 p.m. would be removed. Police started removing tents and pods after a federal judge told city officials nothing prevented them from enforcing health and safety codes.

US District Court Judge David Bury told city officials that the so-called Dream Pods would not be recognized as an extension of a person’s right to freedom of speech.

Police harassment has been a constant feature of life in the homeless encampment, which was born out of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement. Earlier in the month, police raided the encampment and arrested six people for possession and sale of drugs. Protest leader Jon McLane, an Iraq war veteran and original organizer of Occupy Tucson, was also arrested. In 2011, when Occupy activists sued the city for issuing hundreds of citations against camping downtown, a temporary injunction was issued by the court allowing protesters and others to remain.

Homelessness, in particular youth homelessness, in Arizona is among the highest in the US. At least 2.5 million youth in the US experienced homelessness, either alone or with their families, in the past year. According to a November 2014 report from the National Center on Family Homelessness, youth in Arizona are more at risk of being homeless than youth in any other state.

According to the report, youth homelessness is at a “historic high” in the US, with one in every 30 children

experiencing homelessness in 2013. In Arizona alone, 62,616 children were homeless, with the state reporting 6,000 runaway or homeless youth in Pima County alone.

Charitable organizations like downtown Tucson's Gospel Rescue Mission struggle to keep up with the demand for food and shelter. Program Supervisor Dee Cardinale told the *Tucson Sentinel*, "We turn away between five and 25 women and children every day" because the shelter is always full.

In 2013, while the minimum wage was \$7.80 per hour in Arizona, a two-bedroom apartment needed a family member to earn \$17.19 per hour, according to the National Center on Family Homelessness. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development recently said, "A family with one full-time worker earning the minimum wage cannot afford the local fair-market rent for a two-bedroom apartment anywhere in the United States."

In order to meet its housing needs Arizona will have to provide 60,000 more affordable housing units, according to Sally Stang, director of Housing and Community Development for Tucson. Federal funding for affordable housing has dropped by 50 percent over the past five years.



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