

Kansas City health officials, police destroy food meant for homeless

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Health officials in Kansas City, Missouri sparked national outrage when they poured bleach on food meant for homeless and hungry people. The *Kansas City Star* described Kansas City Health Department (KCHD) raids on food giveaways as “[a] coordinated wave,” stopping food distribution at several parks in Kansas City on November 4.

KCHD officials monitored social media groups to determine the locations of the food distribution sites. Together with police officers, they confiscated soup, sandwiches and chili dogs, throwing the food out and pouring bleach on some of it.

The food was being distributed by Free Hot Soup Kansas City, a group of people who cook food and host potluck dinners for those in need. They were also preparing to distribute coats, toiletries and first aid supplies.

After video of edible food being thrown out circulated on social media, KCHD was forced to justify its actions.

KCHD officials claimed that the gatherings were “food establishments” and Free Hot Soup KC was an “organization,” which required a permit to distribute food. Kansas City Director of Health Rex Archer said the food was destroyed to protect public health and mitigate the risk of food-borne illness.

Despite claims to be looking out for public health, however, KCHD cracked down on Free Hot Soup at the instigation of the North Blue Ridge Neighborhood Association and Missouri Representative Ingrid Burnett, a Democrat.

Such neighborhood associations generally represent the interests of property owners, who view homeless people as eyesores and threats to their property values. North Blue Ridge Neighborhood Association President Julie Boye said, “We don’t want to be run over with

homeless people.”

Eric Garbison of the Cherith Brook Catholic Worker house described KCHD’s actions as being “about the criminalization of people who are homeless and the people who support them,” and noted such attacks escalate during the winter, when homelessness becomes more visible. Kansas City has repeatedly attempted to ban street panhandling and shopping carts.

Tara McGaw, who helps organize Free Hot Soup in nearby Belton, told the *Star*: “This is scaring all of us. We’re not an establishment. We’re not a not-for-profit. We’re just friends trying to help people on the side.”

Free Hot Soup founder Nellie McCool has also argued along these lines, emphasizing her friendship with many of the people who eat food with the group and the damage done by KCHD on the pretext of protecting public health. “We’re a community of people who feel it’s their passion to share with the most vulnerable people in our community,” she told the *Star*.

In a widely shared Facebook post, McCool wrote that KCHD “illegally searched cars, disposed of baked goods, bleached home cooked food, and accused my friends of being an establishment due to using social media to communicate and plan our events. They shamed and dehumanized our friends who were excited to share a meal with us, some housed and some unhoused.”

A subsequent distribution event by Free Hot Soup was not disrupted, no doubt due to public outrage. Volunteers came with food thermometers to demonstrate the safety of the food and were prepared to show their food handlers’ licenses.

Mayor Sly James, a Democrat who was elected in a nonpartisan election, having been promoted by the Obama White House, tweeted, “Regarding the incident

involving Free Hot Soup & @KCMOHealthDept: Rules are there to protect the public's health, and all groups must follow them, no exceptions."

City officials and others involved in the efforts to shut down the food distributions claimed to be concerned about the public welfare as well as the plight of homeless people. North Blue Ridge Neighborhood Association President Boye said she was concerned "about how best to help," while Representative Burnett said, "We all know that we are one catastrophe away from being in the same boat."

Putting aside the fact that a state representative is hardly as economically vulnerable as the average Kansas City resident, there have been large numbers of homeless people in Kansas City for years and the government has done next to nothing to provide them with decent shelter and nutrition. The Department of Housing and Urban Development's "Point in Time" census, which substantially underestimates homelessness, counted 1,671 homeless individuals and 1,248 homeless households in the city last year.

Kansas City's median household income is \$51,235, about \$4,000 less than the national median. The city is a major Great Plains economic center, having rebranded itself as "Silicon Prairie." It hosts meatpacking, dairy and auto facilities. Nevertheless, Kansas City, Missouri and Kansas City, Kansas, and both of the states that are home to the Kansas City metropolitan area, are notoriously anti-worker.

An editorial in the *Star*, "Why Kansas and Missouri are lousy places to live if you're poor," noted that a study ranked Kansas the fourth worst state and Missouri the fifth worst for impoverished people. Missouri's Medicaid income cutoff is 22 percent of the federal poverty line, and its income tax code is "particularly regressive." Kansas' minimum wage is at the federal level, \$7.25 an hour.



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