

As 150,000 hotel rooms remain empty, Las Vegas government forces 500 homeless residents to sleep outside on asphalt parking lot

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Following the closure of one of the largest homeless shelters in the Las Vegas valley on Wednesday, after someone staying there tested positive for COVID-19, government and civic leaders have consigned over 500 men to a fenced-in portion of a concrete parking lot, where they may stay from 6 p.m. through 8 a.m.

Luxury hotel properties such as the MGM Grand, with over 5,000 rooms, including 1250-foot penthouse suites complete with “a king bed and a wet bar for four,” as well as convention centers, lay empty due to the belated shutdown of the casino industry for less than two weeks in an effort to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Meanwhile the men have been allocated one thin white blanket and are allowed to sleep within freshly painted white squares on the pavement. The squares are less than six feet apart from each other, in violation of Centers for Disease Control guidelines on social distancing to help stop the spread of the coronavirus.

After photos of the deplorable conditions began circulating online, city of Las Vegas officials sought to literally cover up their inhumane practices by rolling out 25,000 feet of “blue carpet” over the squares so that residents of the parking lot would have a soft surface to sleep on. However when this reporter visited the elevated parking lot no “blue carpet” was found, nor any shade from the desert sun. The fenced-off portion of the parking lot is expected to serve as a “shelter” for the men until the Catholic Charities homeless shelter reopens on April 3.

As of this writing there have been 1,008 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 18 deaths within the state,

according to the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services. These numbers are a drastic undercount, as testing kits remain largely unavailable throughout the state.

The man at the homeless shelter who tested positive was asymptomatic at the time the test came back. However, a Catholic Charities shelter worker had also tested positive the week before. Following the confirmation of two separate positive cases within the facility, Catholic Charities, with the assistance of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police, closed the shelter and locked its doors, displacing an estimated 500 homeless men. The police proceeded to force the exiled population out of the building and into the city-funded ghetto known as the “Courtyard” before they were finally moved to the parking lot.

The Courtyard, with its listed capacity of 450 residents, had been overflowing for weeks. The man who tested positive for the virus had stayed within the deadly confines of the Courtyard in the last two weeks, making it highly likely that other residents have contracted COVID-19.

However, no mass testing of all those who came in contact with him has been conducted. Instead of thorough testing and quarantining of infected individuals, a select few Courtyard residents have had their temperature checked periodically. One resident, who wished to remain anonymous, described the cramped conditions within the Courtyard as a “cow corral.”

Richard Beardall, 55, spoke to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* on conditions within the open-air Courtyard.

“We’re sleeping so close we can touch each other. And there are mice that wake me up.” The twelve portable toilets meant to service over 500 people were filled to the brim on Wednesday, according to Beardall. “It’s disgusting. They didn’t clean them today. But we have no choice. We need gloves. We need something to protect us.”

City spokesman Jace Radke in a conference on Wednesday acknowledged that United Services, the company hired to manage the facilities, “missed” their weekly cleaning and restocking appointment on Monday, due to “demand for the company’s services,” which “has increased due to the pandemic.” Why the company did not reschedule for Tuesday or Wednesday Radke did not explain.

In addition to a lack of sanitizer or protective equipment, the sinks which residents are meant to use to wash their hands were devoid of water, ensuring the continued spread of communicable diseases, including the novel coronavirus, among the vulnerable population. The Courtyard reported that 565 people slept within its chain-linked fences on Wednesday night, without access to running water.

As conditions within the Courtyard grew more dire and social tensions rose, Clark County spokesman Dan Kulin sought to reassure the displaced that the city “will provide space for approximately 750 people to sleep.” This “space” was located nearly a mile away, in the parking lot of the Cashman Center complex, which features a theater, baseball field and a nearly 100,000-square-foot convention center, which hosted the 2008 Democratic Presidential debate.

A cursory search of *Zillow.com* for “Las Vegas Condos” yields 1,525 results, while filtering to “houses for sale” returns 5,127 listings. Meanwhile 950 workers continue to work through the pandemic, building a 1.4 million-square-foot expansion to the gigantic 3.2 million-square-foot Las Vegas Convention Center.

Workers are risking their lives pouring 75 million pounds of concrete, not towards the construction of hospitals for incoming patients or to house the homeless, but in anticipation of the CES January 2021 consumer electronics convention. The convention center, which is centrally located, could quickly be repurposed as a hospital and screening center from which those infected could be quarantined privately and humanely in any one of the nearby available rooms.

Instead of repurposing any of these spaces or any of the literally hundreds of thousands of empty hotel rooms in order to provide humane safe housing, city planners, business leaders and government officials determined that a parking lot would suffice. Those who could walk were marched to the paved lot, where ten Touro University Nevada healthcare students and two professors, in addition to volunteers, were waiting to take temperatures and distribute blankets. Those who couldn’t make the trek, either due to age or disability, were left to stay in the dangerous Courtyard.

Confirming the government’s unwillingness provide safe humane housing for the thousands of homeless and unsheltered in the region, Las Vegas City Manager Scott Adams confirmed to the *Review-Journal* that the city’s recently adopted anti-human homeless ordinances, which ban camping in public spaces, will still be enforced during the pandemic.

In a statement to the local press, Clark County Commissioner Justin Jones reflected on a job well done in confining several hundred men to the corner of parking lot, noting, “We’re proud to be working in collaboration with the city to meet the needs of our homeless population...” Las Vegas city spokesman David Rigglesman added, “We’re really pleased so many people came together.”



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