
NATIONAL LAW CENTER ON HOMELESSNESS & POVERTY

June 8, 2020

Mayor Lucy Vinis, lvinis@eugene-or.gov
City Council of Eugene, <http://www.eugene-or.gov/>
City Manager Pro Tem Sarah Medary, smedary@eugene-or.gov

Via email

Dear Mayor, City Council, and City Manager,

I write on behalf of the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (“Law Center”) regarding the closure of temporary shelter facilities for people experiencing homelessness in Eugene, OR during the COVID-19 crisis, the lack of individual housing options for the 50+ residents of these facilities, and the enforcement of anti-camping ordinances against people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 crisis. We call for the city to provide immediate individual housing units for people experiencing homelessness for the duration of the pandemic, or, in the alternative, to ensure safe, legal places where people can shelter in place with access to adequate sanitation and services.

As you are probably aware, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have issued [guidance](#) against clearing homeless encampments during the present pandemic. The CDC has also recommended to “continu[e] homeless services during community spread of COVID-19,” including temporary housing such as the overflow sites being shut down. These recommendations are designed to ensure that people experiencing homelessness are able to safely shelter-in-place without fear of punishment. Displacing encampment residents from their private tents or overflow facilities without providing individual housing units or alternative housing for those displaced will create a breeding ground for COVID-19 and rapidly increase the number of people requiring hospitalization and intensive care.

The Law Center has documented more than [85 jurisdictions](#) across the country that have placed people experiencing homelessness into individual units, primarily vacant hotel rooms, but also a number of communities working with their local universities to place people into vacant dorm rooms. Boston, for example, is housing both shelter [staff](#) and [clients](#) in dorms. Eugene could certainly look to the University of Oregon for similar partnership. Failing individual housing, the city must ensure that the former residents of the shelter facility, and all other people experiencing homelessness, have safe, legal places where they can continue to shelter in place. The CDC recommends installing hand-washing stations, portable latrines, and other sanitation services for unhoused people near the areas where they are located outside. With the passage of the federal CARES Act, which allows for reimbursement of costs already incurred in response to the COVID-19 crisis, implementing these approaches immediately is highly recommended. The CARES Act specifically sets aside \$4 billion “to prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus, among individuals who are homeless or receiving homeless assistance.” This money would be used to reimburse Eugene for costs associated with responses to coronavirus for people experiencing homelessness, including providing individual housing units such as hotel or dorm rooms.

Though congregate shelter facilities are not a substitute for providing individual housing to people experiencing homelessness especially during the COVID-19 crisis, eliminating them as a legal place for people to be without ensuring an alternative will only return Eugene to its expensive and counter-productive whack-a-mole process of chasing encampments around town while not addressing the underlying need for housing. As demonstrated by the use of the overflow shelter, people are not resistant to utilizing these services when they are appropriate for their needs.

The Law Center is the nation's only legal advocacy organization dedicated solely to ending and preventing homelessness. In 2017, we published [*Tent City, USA: The Growth of America's Homeless Encampments, and How Communities are Responding*](#), collecting data on 187 cities' policy responses to encampments, and best practices, model policies, and case studies from across the country. Additionally, since 1991, the Law Center has documented a dramatic increase in laws that criminally punish homeless people for performing harmless, life-sustaining activities in public places, as well as the negative consequences of these discriminatory measures nationwide. See National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, [HOUSING NOT HANDCUFFS: Ending THE CRIMINALIZATION OF HOMELESSNESS IN U.S. CITIES \(2019\)](#).

The Law Center's recent reports demonstrate that encampment evictions, citing, arresting, adjudicating, and jailing unhoused people all fail to address the underlying causes of homelessness. Rather than provide adequate alternatives, such enforcements of criminalization injure homeless persons' rights and waste taxpayer resources by temporarily cycling people through the costly criminal justice system, only to have them return to the streets, now with criminal records that make it more difficult for them to access needed employment, housing, and benefits.

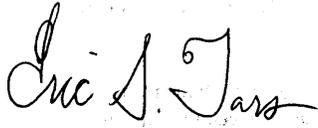
Furthermore, numerous studies have shown that communities actually save money by providing housing and services to those in need, rather saddling them with fines, fees and arrest records and cycling them through expensive hospital and jail systems. See HOUSING NOT HANDCUFFS, *supra*. The Economic Roundtable of Homelessness in Los Angeles found that housing reduced average monthly spending by 41% per person, even after including the cost of providing housing. *This savings included a 95% reduction in jail facilities and services costs.*

We all share the goal of a Eugene without homeless encampments—and the best, most cost-effective, and permanent way to achieve that is to ensure that all who live in those encampments are able to access adequate, alternative housing, not criminalization. Likewise, providing people experiencing homelessness sanctioned places to shelter, especially individual housing units, is the best way to reduce the spread of COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness.

These approaches are necessary for the current crisis, but they are also the best practice for the long term, from both a public health and fiscal policy perspective. We urge you to follow the CDC recommendations as well as the Law Center's Encampment Best Practices and Procedures found in the Tent City Report by ensuring the availability of 1) individual housing units or 2) clearly identifying legal places for people experiencing homelessness to self-shelter and providing services and sanitation to them in place until they are able to exit to permanent housing. This is not a matter of charity, but of public health that will not only benefit people experiencing homelessness, but the housed members of your community who will have hospital beds available to them when they need them, instead of having those beds unnecessarily occupied by people who were swept from encampments or removed from temporary shelter facilities and subjected

to increased risk of infection. If Eugene would like, we would be happy to work with you to develop and implement solutions that work for everyone. Please feel free to contact me at etars@nlchp.org or 202-638-2535 x. 120 with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Eric S. Tars". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "E" and "T".

Eric S. Tars
Legal Director