

Residents express outrage at removal of homeless camps to Newark City Council

Kent Mallett, Newark Advocate Published 3:17 p.m. ET March 19, 2019 | Updated 9:55 a.m. ET March 20, 2019

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Newark City Council members listen to residents discuss the issue of homelessness in the city at Monday night's council meeting. (Photo: Kent Mallett/The Advocate)

NEWARK – Citizens packed City Council chambers Monday night to express concern for the homeless and dismay with the city's response to them in tents even in bitter cold.

The removal of three homeless camps infuriated some residents, who claim city officials lack the compassion for the homeless, who they said have nowhere to go except to set up another camp somewhere else.

City leaders, however, say they must respond to complaints about camps with unsanitary conditions that can attract animals and endanger the health and safety of residents living near the camps set up on private property.

Jen Kanagy, a co-partner of Newark Homeless Outreach and a Democratic candidate for an at-large council seat, said three camps were reportedly destroyed a few weeks ago – on the bike path behind the Salvation Army, on Webb Street and on Dayton Road. She said box cutters were used to destroy the tents behind the Salvation Army and the other two sites were bulldozed.

Kanagy said Safety Director Steve Baum unfairly attacked her at the previous council meeting after she said she had been told the city destroyed a camp on Webb Street/Bolen Court. Baum initially said the city was not involved, but later discovered there was city involvement on the Bolen Court Street site.

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"My volunteers and I were told Newark was not there, the police department was absolutely not there and the city had nothing to do with it," Kanagy said.

"We're very concerned with the lack of transparency."

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"We're asking the city to show some compassion. To take the little pieces of life they have left is really inhumane."

Baum said the police responded to an assault complaint at the Bolen Court/Webb Street homeless camp. He said they found two people with out warrants and 4,000 square feet of trash at the site. He said police gave the homeless people more than five hours to collect their stuff before they returned.

"The parks department cleaned up the trash left behind," Baum said. "It took three dump truckloads to clean up the remnants of the camp. To say bulldozed the camp is misleading. They told them they can't stay on railroad property."

Baum said it's not against the law to be homeless, but there are city and health department ordinances that regulate unsanitary conditions such as open food containers and trash laying around, especially in a residential neighborhood.

Patricia Perry, co-partner with Newark Homework Outreach, said the city could have delayed their response because of the frigid temperatures at the time.

"They had been there a year," Kanagy said. "We couldn't have waited until Friday when the weather was better?"

Nancy Welu told council the city suffers from a lack of affordable housing, a lack of shelter and a lack of transportation. She said volunteer efforts Newark Homeless Outreach provide a Band-aid on problems the city should address.

"They're helping people survive every week," Welu said. "There's other grass-roots groups also helping because they see the need that's just not met. We don't have adequate housing for the homeless. There's no housing for homeless with pets."

Alan Schwartz, of Newark Think Tank on Poverty, said renovation and revitalization of an area is great, but it forces the poor to find other places to live.

"We're creating more homeless," Schwartz said. "That's the plan. It's good business, but it creates homelessness. Gentrification is the other side of development. Gentrification – we're not even brave enough to use the word."

Mayor Jeff Hall said following the meeting he does not believe the downtown revitalization displaced the poor from their homes.

"I'm not aware of anyone being displaced downtown for housing," Hall said. "If they were, they were probably living in substandard places" unfit for someone to live.

Councilman Jeremy Blake, D-2nd Ward, a mayoral candidate, said there appears to be a disconnect between some of the volunteers working directly with the homeless and some of the social service experts.

"This isn't an issue we can be silent on," Blake said. "We need to communicate openly and transparently. I've seen some of the tent cities. I've seen people living on our streets. This isn't the way it should be. people are still falling through the cracks."

"Let's not give up. We've got a lot of work to do, but we need to build some bridges."

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