



COUNCIL AGENDA: 10/26/21

FILE#: 21-2259

ITEM: 7.1

Memorandum

TO: HONORABLE MAYOR
AND CITY COUNCIL

FROM: Councilmember David Cohen

SUBJECT: SEE BELOW

DATE: October 26, 2021

Approved

Date: 10/26/2021

SUBJECT: ENCAMPMENT MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

RECOMMENDATION

1. Direct staff to coordinate with each council office to identify encampments for increased trash services, including but not limited to dumpsters with regular garbage disposal.
2. Include local shelter, interim housing, and safe parking capacity as a criterion in the Encampment Management and Safe Relocation protocols when considering abatement.
3. Ensure the Encampment Management and Safe Relocation protocols delineate processes for:
 - a. Determining whether unhoused residents at an encampment designated for abatement are receiving services from the county, including but not limited to behavioral health, substance abuse, veterans' services, and social services
 - b. Notifying the county when residents receiving services are abated to minimize disruption of service delivery
 - c. Connecting unhoused residents with county services if needed

BACKGROUND

I appreciate the insights and progress shared by staff in their report on the implementation of the City's encampment management strategy. In light of the challenges our City faces in addressing homelessness, it is crucial that we develop an approach to encampments that is effective, compassionate, and sustainable. It is my hope that the recommendations proposed in this memo will build on the work detailed in the staff report in creating that approach.

Abatement is by far our costliest and most labor-intensive response to homelessness. A HUD report released just last year found that in FY 2019, the City of San José spent nearly \$5 million on clearing out and closing down encampments—compared to just \$800,000 spent on outreach and engagement. The process is traumatic for the unhoused residents, for whom abatement represents not just the loss of belongings or a place to stay but also of any sense of stability.

Above all, it offers no meaningful, long-term solution to homelessness. Abatement does not bring unhoused residents off the streets and into shelter; it merely forces them to move somewhere else in the city, sometimes only temporarily before returning to the same location where they were abated. For this reason, as expressed in my joint memorandum with Councilmember Foley on March 23rd, it should remain a last resort.

Unfortunately, there are conditions—in the case of encampments that are in the right of way, that present serious environmental concerns, that pose a hazard to the health of the unhoused or nearby residents—in which abatement is necessary for the safety and wellbeing of our residents. Otherwise, we must recognize that abatements are, at best, an expensive and destructive stopgap measure, and we need to take steps to make sure those abatements we do move forward with do not exacerbate San José's housing and homelessness challenges. These considerations should be part of the Encampment Management and Safe Relocation protocols being developed by staff, in the same way factors like geographical location and safety risk are considered. To the greatest extent possible, before undertaking the abatement of an encampment, we should ensure that our local shelter system has capacity for the residents being abated.

Moreover, when we abate encampments, we should do our best to prevent that action from disrupting the delivery of much-needed health services from the county. It is an unfortunate reality that case workers often struggle to deliver consistent care and service to unhoused clients due to their lack of stability, and abatement only aggravates that problem. A process should be in place to ensure county departments involved in providing services to unhoused residents—such as behavioral health or substance abuse services—are aware of when and where an abatement is taking place, so that the interruption of services to the residents involved can be minimized and those residents do not fall out of the continuum of care as a result of abatement.

We should also continue to work towards mitigating the impacts of blight from encampments on the environment and on local quality of life. The report from staff indicates that trash pickup services are being provided every two weeks to about 220 encampments around the city, and I thank staff for allocating funds to step this up to weekly services. I would like to build on this progress by ensuring that encampments that may not be receiving regular trash pickup services have, at a minimum, access to a dumpster, so that unhoused residents have a means of disposing of trash without littering or illegal dumping. The identification of these sites should be done in coordination with council offices, which can share with staff their insights on which encampments in their districts have been associated with complaints about garbage.

With steep growth over the last few years in the number of encampments in San José, as well as the population of the encampments, it is clear that any solutions to homelessness must be built on a foundation of effective encampment management. Staff's report shows clear progress towards creating that foundation, and I thank them for their work as we continue to tackle the challenges of homelessness in San José.