

Encampment Principles & Best Practices

Based on input from federal, state, and local representatives, service providers, and people experiencing homelessness, as well as relevant domestic and international laws, our initial findings revealed certain key principles and corresponding practices that appear to be important for successful interventions to end encampments in our communities. These principles and practices are excerpted from TENT CITY, USA: The Growth of America’s Homeless Encampments and How Communities are Responding (https://www.nlchp.org/Tent_City_USA_2017), which also includes numerous case studies of communities implementing these best practices. As a caution, we note that while incorporating interim encampments into a plan to end homelessness may provide homeless individuals with an improvement in their quality of life and reduce calls for criminalization, the community must also have a serious and funded long-term plan that ensures the availability of permanent, adequate, appropriate housing for all, so encampments do not become a permanent feature of our cities and towns.

Encampment Principles and Practices	
<p>Principle 1: All people need safe, accessible, legal place to be, both at night and during the day, and a place to securely store belongings—until permanent housing is found.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Determine the community’s full need for housing and services, and then create a binding plan to ensure full access to supportive services and housing affordable for all community members so encampments are not a permanent feature of the community. 2. Repeal or stop enforcing counterproductive municipal ordinances and state laws that criminalize sleeping, camping, and storage of belongings. 3. Provide safe, accessible, and legal places to sleep and shelter, both day and night. Provide clear guidance on how to access these locations. 4. Create storage facilities for persons experiencing homelessness, ensuring they are accessible—close to other services and transportation, do not require ID, and open beyond business hours.
<p>Principle 2: Delivery of services must respect the experience, human dignity, and human rights of those receiving them.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Be guided by frequent and meaningful consultation with the people living in encampments. Homeless people are the experts of their own condition. 2. Respect autonomy and self-governance for encampment residents. 3. Offer services in a way that is sensitive and appropriate with regard to race, ethnicity, culture, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other characteristics. Use a trauma-informed approach.
<p>Principle 3: Any move or removal of an encampment must follow clear procedures that protect residents.</p>	<p>Create clear procedures for ending homelessness for people living in pre-existing encampments, including:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Make a commitment that encampments will not be removed unless all residents are first consulted and provided access to adequate alternative housing or—in emergency situations—another adequate place to stay. 2. If there are pilot periods or required rotations of sanctioned encampments, ensure that residents have a clear legal place to go and assistance with the transition. Pilot periods or requiring rotation of legal encampments/parking areas on a periodic basis (e.g., annually or semi-annually) can help reduce local “not-in-my-back-yard” opposition, but shorter time periods hinder success. 3. Provide sufficient notice to residents and healthcare/social service workers to be able to determine housing needs and meet them (recommended minimum 30 days, but longer if needed). 4. Assist with moving and storage to enable residents to retain their possessions as they transfer either to housing, shelter, or alternative encampments.

<p>Principle 4: Where new temporary legalized encampments are used as part of a continuum of shelter and housing, ensure it is as close to possible to fully adequate housing.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish clear end dates by which point adequate low-barrier housing or appropriate shelter will be available for all living in the legal encampments. 2. Protect public health by providing access to water, personal hygiene (including bathrooms with hand washing capability), sanitation, and cooking services or access to SNAPs hot meals benefits. 3. Provide easy access to convenient 24-hour transportation, particularly if services are not co-located. 4. Statutes and ordinances facilitating partnerships with local businesses, religious organizations, or non-profits to sponsor, support or host encampments or safe overnight parking lots for persons living in their vehicles can help engage new resources and improve the success of encampments. 5. Do not require other unsheltered people experiencing homelessness to reside in the encampments if the facilities do not meet their needs.
<p>Principle 5: Adequate alternative housing must be a decent alternative.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensure that emergency shelters are low-barrier, temporary respites for a few nights while homeless individuals are matched with appropriate permanent housing; they are not long-term alternatives to affordable housing and not appropriate in the short term for everyone. Low-barrier shelter includes the “3 P’s”—pets, possessions, and partners, as well as accessible to persons with disabilities or substance abuse problems. 2. Adequate housing must be: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Safe, stable, and secure: a safe and private place to sleep and store belongings without fear of harassment or unplanned eviction; b. Habitable: with services (electricity, hygiene, sanitation), protection from the elements and environmental hazards, and not overcrowded; c. Affordable: housing costs should not force people to choose between paying rent and paying for other basic needs (food, health, etc.); d. Accessible: physically (appropriate for residents’ physical and mental disabilities, close to/transport to services and other opportunities) and practically (no discriminatory barriers, no compelling participation in or subjection to religion).
<p>Principle 6: Law enforcement should serve and protect all members of the community.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Law and policies criminalizing homelessness, including those criminalizing public sleeping, camping, sheltering, storing belongings, sitting, lying, vehicle dwelling, and panhandling should be repealed or stop being enforced. 2. Law enforcement should serve and protect encampment residents at their request. 3. Law enforcement officers—including dispatchers, police, sheriffs, park rangers, and private business improvement district security—should receive crisis intervention training and ideally be paired with fully-trained multi-disciplinary social service teams when interacting with homeless populations.

Beyond these specific recommendations, in order to create the long-term housing solutions communities needed to permanently end encampments, we also encourage individuals and organizations to look at the model policies of the Housing Not Handcuffs Campaign: housingnohandcuffs.org.