

City Hall encampment ends, but some homeless still have nowhere to go

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Groups of people with nowhere to shelter returned to Deering Oaks this week after protesters disbanded a high-profile encampment that lasted more than two weeks outside Portland City Hall.

But the City Hall protest ended without any concrete commitment from the city to meet the group's demands or any immediate solution to meet the needs of unsheltered homeless people who still have nowhere to go during the pandemic.

Between 40 and 50 people spent Thursday afternoon on a grassy strip in the park between Forest Avenue and High Street, some congregating near Park Avenue and others scattered beneath trees trying to get some sleep. Trash was strewn around the area, including empty chip bags, paper plates, small rolls of unused toilet paper and blankets.

Christine Blair, 42, who had been staying at the City Hall protest encampment, rested in the shade and prepared for what could be another long night. She said police come through every night to enforce a city ordinance that prohibits people sleeping overnight in city parks.



Christine Blair, who is homeless, embraces her son, Cody Taylor, who recently found permanent shelter, on a strip of public land between Forest Avenue and High Street, where a daytime homeless camp has sprung up. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

“They kick us out at 10 or 11, or whenever they feel like it,” said Blair, who was visibly tired. “Then you go find a place to sleep on the sidewalk.”

The move highlights the challenges of serving vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations of people – especially those with mental illness, substance use disorder, or some combination of both, whose behaviors often cause them to be banned from city shelters and local hotels, leaving them with no other option than to sleep outside. While Portland has always had unsheltered homeless people, especially during summers, the pandemic restricted access to public and private facilities and left those people with no place to go for basic services such as bathrooms and showers.

The number of unsheltered homeless people was thrust into public view shortly after the nonprofit social service agency Preble Street announced that it would not reopen its Resource Center in Bayside, which provided access to bathrooms and social services, as well as a large soup kitchen. The nonprofit fenced off its courtyard and stopped handing out meals outside the soup kitchen, and people accustomed to hanging out there moved down to Deering Oaks.

Preble Street said it made the changes because the agency was not able to maintain the social distancing necessary to prevent the transmission of the coronavirus. The nonprofit social service agency is now delivering meals to area shelters and offers a mobile food service to feed those who are not staying at a shelter.

Preble Street was delivering meals to Deering Oaks until the city ordered it to stop in response to complaints about an encampment there. The locations for mobile food include three areas in Bayside, only a few blocks from the park.

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In response to Preble Street's closure, the city's order to stop meal deliveries in the park and other concerns about homeless services provided in Maine's largest city, protesters set up the City Hall encampment on July 22. It grew larger over the following two weeks until last Friday, when it began to wind down without any clear commitment from the city to meet any of the group's demands. A city spokesperson confirmed that the final two City Hall campers were arrested on Monday night after refusing to disperse.

Portland Communications Director Jessica Grondin said a 56-year-old man was charged with refusing to give personal information to a police officer and another 56-year-old man was charged with criminal mischief after he allegedly "used a bicycle locking cable to secure himself to a nearby tree."

Shelter space found for some

Protesters did get the city's attention, and officials are discussing a number of initiatives.

An organizer of the protest spoke with Portland's mayor Friday about the ongoing needs and city efforts to help. And a City Council subcommittee may look into establishing an overdose prevention site, one of the group's demands. Other specific demands included: legalizing camping in city parks, freezing all evictions, defunding the police and investing more social services to treat substance use and mental illness.

The city says it continues trying to get people into shelters if they had been there before the pandemic and are eligible to return. And new arrivals to the shelter system as well as people banned because of misbehavior may still be eligible for a hotel room through Portland's state-funded General Assistance program. But there are still people who would prefer to sleep outside.

Grondin said city staff members visited Deering Oaks on Wednesday and learned that 18 of the people there had access to overnight shelter, while 15 did not and were referred to either an emergency shelter or the city's General Assistance office.

Grondin said the city has not been tracking how many people staff members have helped to shelter. But over the last week, an additional 28 people have accessed the adult shelter at the Oxford Street Shelter or the temporary shelter at the Portland Expo, bringing the total to 91 people. And 33 people have been placed in housing since the pandemic began, she said. About 200 people have been provided with hotel rooms during the pandemic.

Mayor Kate Snyder said she spoke to one of the encampment organizers, Jess Falero, on Friday about ways to address the issues highlighted by the protest and the immediate needs, such as showers and bathrooms for people unable to access shelters or hotels, that are still unaddressed.

“I think it’s great to be working with Jess,” Snyder said.

Kristen Dow, director of the city’s health and human services department, said the city is looking for a location to create a new day space where unsheltered people could have access to restrooms and services.

“At this point, no space has been identified, but we continue to look at a variety of options that could include a designated outdoor space if one could be identified,” Dow said. “Several community providers have offered to assist in staffing the space once it is identified, so this would be a true community effort.”

Councilors had floated the idea of using the Cross Insurance Arena as a temporary day room and shelter, but that would require approval of the county commissioners. A spokesperson for the county said the city has not made a formal request to have that item appear on a commission agenda.

Grondin said she planned to file a request by the end of the day Friday to use the arena as a day space until late September, when they would like to use it as an overnight shelter once the temporary shelter at the Expo is closed.

Encampment organizers try to keep pressure on

Meanwhile, organizers of the disbanded City Hall encampment are considering ways to keep the pressure on.

On Monday, a group marched throughout the city to draw attention to the plight of the homeless. The group began at Monument Square and marched to City Hall and the police station before heading down to Preble Street, where several participants tossed their signs over the fenced in courtyard to show their displeasure with the closure of the resource center.

Blair's son, Cody Taylor, 19, who has struggled with homelessness, helped organize the march. Although he found a place to live last week, Taylor said he will continue to show up for the homeless community. He was concerned that a hand-washing station installed at Deering Oaks to promote hygiene was promptly removed by the city.

"These people aren't having their basic human needs met," Taylor said.

The move by campers back to Deering Oaks means concerns about sanitation and misbehavior have returned with them.

Anne Pringle, a former mayor who is the president of the Friends of Deering Oaks, said activity at the park quieted down during the City Hall encampment, but has since resumed. And along with it, unhealthy and illegal behaviors, including drinking, drug use, smoking and public urination and defecation, she said.

"Everybody is entitled to use the public park – there's no questions about it – but there are basic rules that anyone using the park has to follow and they're reasonable and appropriate rules," Pringle said. "We are in touch with the city literally everyday to get this fixed and under control. We can't have this rampant violations of the rules."

But there also is concern that enforcing the rules too aggressively will hurt efforts to solve the underlying problems.

A committee that monitors emergency shelter use in the city held a special meeting Thursday to address the challenge. The Emergency Shelter Assessment Committee is considering expanding its mission to include policy recommendations to the council, monitoring the population of unsheltered homeless people and possibly expanding their voting membership to include some of the organizers of the encampment, if they're willing to join.

Members discussed the importance of conducting outreach to people in the park and worried that a strong police response could threaten the relationships being cultivated by outreach workers from 14 different organizations, including the city, state and nonprofit groups like Preble Street and Amistad.

"All of that relationship work is imperative and it sounds like with the (trespass orders) being issued for Deering Oaks some of that relationship work could be jeopardized," said Vickey Rand, advocacy and communication director for the nonprofit housing group Community Housing of Maine. "It takes time to rebuild."

District Attorney Jonathan Sahrbeck told the committee that police are also frustrated, since they're charged with enforcing city ordinances and don't have any answers when people ask them where they should go.

“It’s frustrating on all levels for people,” he said. “It really does have to come from a much bigger policy perspective, rather than from an enforcement perspective ... I’d like to see things are getting done and people are having these conversations so we’re not just kicking the can down the road.”

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