

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Nov 19, 2018

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Pastor Files Lawsuit Against the City of Aberdeen

A lawsuit has been filed in federal district court this morning, by the Rev Sarah Monroe, April Obi Boling, and Tim Quigg against the City of Aberdeen, Mayor Erik Larson, and City Engineer Kris Koski.

People experiencing homelessness in Aberdeen have been camping out and living on the banks of the Chehalis River for decades, more and more people joining the encampment over recent years as they get squeezed out of a dwindling housing market. Most recently, the city purchased the land people have been camping on, in August of this year. The city says they intend to clear it, as it is not safe for human habitation, but also rolled out a transition plan. On September 25, police and city officials required anyone on the property or visiting the property to obtain permits, granting around 108 permits to people who wish to continue residing there, or who have nowhere else to go.

They gated the property and prohibited vehicle access and announced that all advocates and social service providers also needed to apply for a permit to access the property. When the Rev Sarah Monroe applied on Oct 4, citing her position as a pastor and the fact that she serves as pastor to most residents at the encampment, her application was denied. The city engineer, in charge of deciding what services would be allowed, told her that she "did not provide enough detail" or a schedule. Rev Monroe informed the city that pastoral care and visits could not be scheduled and she could not provide personal information of people she was visiting as a matter of confidentiality.

Tim Quigg, a local businessman and philanthropist, and April Obi Boling, a local woman who has multiple family members living in the camp and is an enrolled member of the Quileute Tribe, joined the suit. Neither of them applied for permits and all three of the plaintiffs believe that it is a violation of their first amendment rights to freely speak to their friends and loved ones and exercise freedom of religion.

The Rev Sarah Monroe is the priest in charge of Chaplains on the Harbor, a ministry that serves people experiencing poverty and homelessness in Grays Harbor County. This is her statement:

We have not undertaken this lawsuit lightly. The recent actions of the City of Aberdeen regarding the encampment along the Chehalis River pose threat to our deepest moral and constitutional values. It seems unprecedented, in this country, for a local government to bar advocates, clergy, service providers, family members-- basically anyone trying to assist vulnerable people in getting out of homelessness-- from meeting them where they are staying. We do not believe that this is a good or safe place to live; we simply acknowledge that, for many people, there is little other choice and, while they are in those circumstances, they need pastoral care and support. It is troubling that the City Engineer has been tasked with leading this process, as opposed to someone whose expertise is in health and human services. This signals to us that the City of Aberdeen is not primarily concerned with the 100+ human beings living in crisis on this site, but rather concerned with aesthetic appearances and "cleaning up the town."

Mayor Larson himself has agreed, on public record, that the process of registering encampment residents and requiring all third party visitors to be approved by the city is comparable to the process of visiting incarcerated people-- and that the key difference is these encampment residents can come and go as they please. Combat veterans living with acute agoraphobia cannot easily come and go as they please. Disabled people living with severe chronic pain, amputations, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress cannot easily come and go as they please. People who look visibly poor, in this city, often cannot come and go as they please due to frequent incidents of harassment and vigilante violence on the basis of their housing status.

My permit to visit this encampment was denied by the city on the grounds that I did not provide enough detail, or a schedule, or a clear list of what I intend to do during my visits. I am a priest. I have been pastoring the people in this camp for five years. I do everything from drive people to the hospital, to prayer, to taking people to social service appointments, to performing last rites when people die here. These essential pastoral duties do not happen on a schedule, as any member of the clergy can attest. I have continued to visit people, even though I have been denied a permit, and am petitioning the court to prevent the city from arresting me.

Homeless people have a constitutionally protected right to freedom of religious expression. I have a constitutionally protected right to my freedom of religious expression, which includes serving the poor and the sick and the hungry. The city's actions are a clear attempt to isolate, marginalize, and further criminalize people who have already been pushed to the edge of existence in this community. I consider it my duty as an American citizen and my vocation as a priest to stand against this.

Press Conference:

Nov 20, 2018, 1pm: Held in front of the gates on River Street in Aberdeen