

HOUSE KEYS NOT SWEEPS



June 16, 2021

SHELTERS & SANCTIONED ENCAMPMENTS ARE NOT HOUSING: HOMELESSNESS ENDS WITH A HOME

WRAP was created to expose and eliminate the root causes of civil and human rights abuses of people experiencing poverty and homelessness in our communities. We are demanding our rights and fighting like hell for *all* people (housed & unhoused) to be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.



In the past 38 years since the advent of contemporary homelessness, unhoused people have been subjected to an endless merry-go-round of target sub-populations, competitive community plans, and policy flavors. Rather than addressing the root cause of homelessness, the decimation of federal public housing, these policies are aimed at fixing "broken individuals." Clearly, our governments are not choosing *real* solutions to homelessness— human rights, livable incomes, healthcare, jobs, or a reinstatement of federal affordable housing funding.

In our work fighting criminalization and advocating for housing as a human right, it is critical that we analyze policy trends that *do*

not align with the solutions outlined above and yet are being broadly adopted as the latest way to "end homelessness". One thing that we have seen consistently, across many

programs and "innovative" policy pivots, is an increase in the criminalization and incarceration of unhoused people.

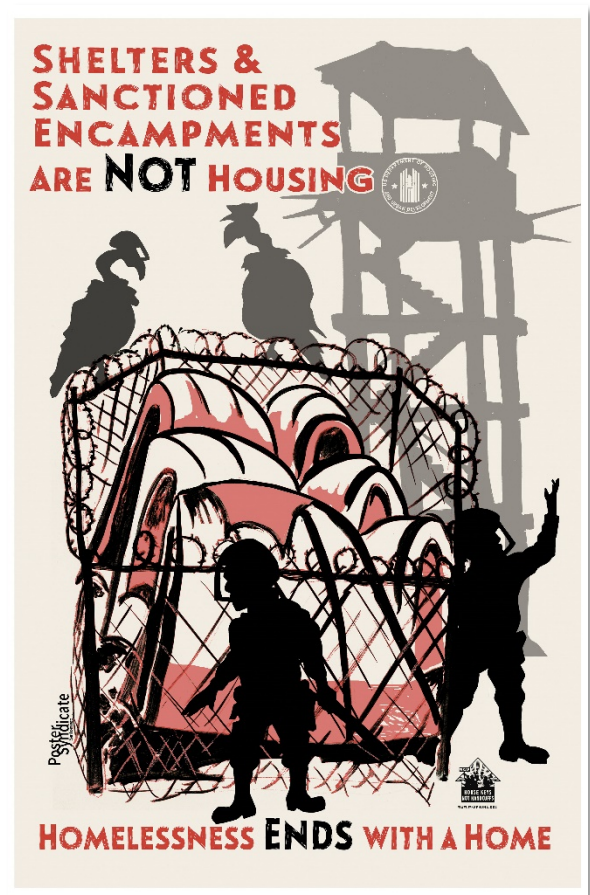
Sanctioned encampments are no exception to this scrutiny. The focus of this position paper is to outline the ways in which these sanctioned encampments can and *will* be used as tools to sweep and warehouse unhoused people, as we have already seen in several cities who have implemented these sites during the COVID-19 pandemic, and with shelters before that.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "SANCTIONED ENCAMPMENTS" ?

Sanctioned encampments, generally, are empty parcels of land in a city or town, usually vacant lots, which are designated for unhoused people to camp. The sanctioned encampments we are addressing in particular are *government controlled* encampments. These significantly differ from community-led encampments (which are often regularly swept and torn down by local authorities).

The key differences, to name a few, are:

1. People living in government controlled encampments, are treated as "clients," not community members, and have very limited rights to self-determination of their community and their space.
2. Government controlled encampments receive government funding and are accountable first and foremost to the government, not to unhoused community members.
3. Government controlled encampments, as a tier of the existing shelter system, will be leveraged *against* unhoused people who decline to live in them; people who



refuse placements in these encampments will be declared "service resistant," a label that public officials and law enforcement use to justify increased enforcement of anti-homeless laws.

How or whether local organizations should engage with government sanctioned encampments is not the focus of our paper. Instead, our goal is to analyze this development in the context of the history of "homeless policy" in the US, a history that is thoroughly entrenched in neoliberal capitalism, and in the context of the revolutionary future that we're working toward. Sanctioned encampments and shelters are *not* housing. Homelessness ends with a home!

OVERALL POSITION

- No one should be forced or coerced to choose between a controlled shelter, a controlled sanctioned encampment, or jail. But this is exactly what unhoused people are left to do as living in a tent on their own is illegal, and living in a tent at a controlled site is deemed ok.
- In the context of the broader trend in which a mere *offer* of *any* kind of service is enough for local governments and law enforcement to justify intensified criminalization, these sanctioned encampments WILL be used to increase sweeps.
- They are a ridiculous substitute for what unhoused people want and have been asking for (housing, or at the very least to be left the fuck alone in public spaces) and are not progress after nearly 40 years after the advent of contemporary homelessness.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- Sanctioned encampments are not a novel or effective solution contemporary homelessness
 - Federal government created "transient camps" to address mass homelessness during the Depression; camping has also historically been allowed in urban containment zones (where police overlook quality of life

"crimes" and informal economies as long as they are contained in poorer neighborhoods/districts).

- This latest iteration is a product of the federal decimation of affordable housing¹ and the failure of state and local jurisdictions to preserve housing affordability or meaningful tenant protections for their residents.
- Sanctioned encampments are an inevitable consequence of the symbiotic relationship between carceral congregate shelter programs and merciless criminalization on the streets.²

WHAT'S NEW? SANCTIONED ENCAMPMENTS AS A RESPONSE TO COVID-19

- Several of the sanctioned encampments that currently exist across the US were created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and now that cities are scrambling to reopen, they want to maintain the encampments as another way to maintain the illusion that they are solving the housing/homelessness crisis.
- As the court declares eviction moratoriums unconstitutional, cities are anticipating that many more people will soon be living unsheltered. By keeping sanctioned encampments in addition to reopening shelters, they will be able to continue warehousing unhoused people at pre-pandemic rates and keep the reopening on track.

SANCTIONED ENCAMPMENTS AND CRIMINALIZATION – SHELTERS WITHOUT WALLS

- Unless encampment residents are entirely in control of the encampment governance structure, these sanctioned encampments will merely function as shelters without walls, just as carceral and paternalistic but *without* the physical protection or infrastructure a building provides.

¹ Western Regional Advocacy Project. 2006. "Without Housing: Decades of Federal Housing Cutbacks, Massive Homelessness, and Policy Failures."

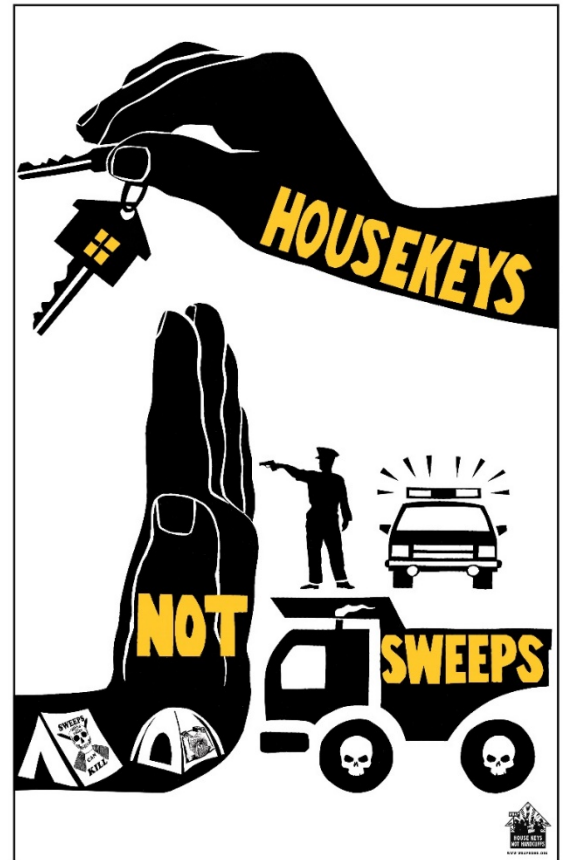
² Herring, Chris. 2021. "Complaint Oriented 'Services' : Shelters as Tools for Criminalizing Homelessness." *ANNALS, AAPSS* 693 (January): 264-283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716221996703>

- The main reasons that some unhoused people prefer these spaces to the streets, such as that they give some respite from harassment or provide some security for their possessions, is because of the unlivable and inhumane conditions that criminalization creates on the streets.
 - Additionally, some unhoused people will choose these encampments because they offer a little more privacy than congregate shelters. Again, this is more indicative of what could be different about shelters, rather than what is good about these sites.
- Overall, people are exhausted by having no legal place to exist in public space and, in some cases, this is the best offer available to them. We honor the choices that unhoused people make for their survival as we continue to fight for a future where they do not need to choose between being in the shelter system or being incarcerated.

OUR DEMANDS!

1. End the practices of sweeping encampments, towing vehicles, and stealing and destroying belongings and structures houseless people create to keep themselves and their communities safe from the elements.
2. End the criminalization of houseless people, without justifying other types of criminalization, by ending the practices of move-along orders, harassment, ticketing and arresting houseless people for existing outside.
3. Sever the relationship between services and criminalization. Offers of service (including offers of shelter in sanctioned encampments) should *not* be used as a tool for enforcement of penalties against unhoused people living unsheltered. This includes dismantling "specialized units" of law enforcement that use coercive service delivery models through their enforcement authority and special access to services.
4. Create and fund access to sanitation and hygiene infrastructure and water access that adequately and quickly responds to the growing number of houseless people.

5. Create and fund a full array of health care treatments, including harm reduction resources that appropriately respond to the needs of poor and houseless people.
6. Create affordable housing units for poor and houseless people, providing adequate funding for the development and maintenance with long term subsidies.
7. Overturn unjust policies and procedures that deny access to deeply affordable housing based on economic status and lived experiences of extreme poverty including homelessness.



Western Regional Advocacy Project - 2940 16th Street, Suite 200-2, San Francisco, CA 94103 TEL: 415.621.2533 | Email: wrap@wraphome.org | Website: www.wraphome.org