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Illegal Homeless Camping in Portland: Field Analysis and Advocacy Planning

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

There are people in Portland who live and sleep outdoors — quite a few of them. They make their homes in nooks and crannies of the city, many in the noisy, dirty spaces between and beneath the freeways, spaces for which other people have little use. In this document we refer to these people as "homeless campers" although these places are their homes. The campers themselves sometimes prefer names like "homesteader" or "pioneer."

The goal of our group, which came together in November of 1994 in Portland State University's Planning Workshop, was to find ways to "improve the lives of homeless campers." We can confidently say that we did so. We let Big Ted* beat us at cribbage. We laughed at Carol's jokes. We admired Larry's dogs, Sandy's jewelry and Joseph's freeway garden. We conversed about the everyday ups and downs of life. There was little artifice in this; it was fairly easy (especially losing at cribbage). Our lives were improved as well. We got to know interesting people, we had new experiences, we got to impress our friends with our knowledge of a subculture.

Perhaps whenever people come together and share each other's lives the world becomes incrementally more humane, more habitable and peoples' lives are better. Perhaps, on a large enough scale, this is the solution to many of the world's ills. It may ultimately be the only answer.

It may be that planning (and we are planners) for people we do not know can never work. It is certainly our conclusion that with groups such as homeless campers, planners must first spend time — ideally, much more time than we spent — getting to know individuals in the group.

Homelessness is a huge, raging, painful, and at times, unbearable problem. Thinking about how to end homelessness can make you feel angry, sad, and very confused. Thinking about how to end homelessness forces you to question the fundamental values of this society. Who is to blame for homelessness? Does it matter? Are we all in this together or are some of us less worthy?

Say that we accept that all people who desire housing should be housed. There are certainly many arguments for such a policy — both pragmatic and philosophical. The members of our group had each separately reached this conclusion before we decided to work together. Having reached such a conclusion, is there anything that can be done while waiting for the rest of society to come to the same agreement? Specifically, are there interim steps that can be taken to improve the situations of homeless campers which also promote incremental progress toward the ultimate goal? It is these questions that our group attempted to answer.

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* The names of the campers have been changed in this document.

We did so by first drawing up a systematic set of objectives and procedures. We then proceeded to do what felt right. We spent a lot of time talking to each other, trying to digest our new knowledge and to apply it constructively. We spent a lot of time worrying. We spent a lot of time changing our minds. Nonetheless, we plowed ahead and discovered some incremental solutions. Our ideas have met with the most meaningful approval we can hope for — that of the campers themselves.

This document attempts to convey what we learned in this process. It is addressed specifically to planners who wish to address the issue of homeless camping, and hopefully who wish to serve as advocates for this underrepresented population.

The following pages are divided into five sections. Part One gives some background on homelessness and illegal camping in the Portland area. Part Two is a narrative of our group's experiences. Part Three lists the alternatives which we identified to, as our planning proposal optimistically stated, "improve the lives of homeless campers in the short term without sacrificing better, longer-term alternatives." Part Four outlines some of the broad issues which planners working with homeless campers may encounter. Part Five lists some methodological recommendations which are based on our experiences.

PART ONE: BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON HOMELESS CAMPING IN PORTLAND

Homelessness is a major problem in Portland. Many people here cannot afford housing of any kind. Although the total number of homeless people in the city is not known, an estimated 14,000 Multnomah County residents spent time in homeless shelters during some part of 1993.[1]

Current shelter space is not sufficient to meet the needs of Portland's homeless year round. During the winter months, downtown shelters are filled beyond reasonable capacity with single men and women. Further from the central city, families are turned away from shelters and forced to seek refuge elsewhere.

The City of Portland and Multnomah County are in the process of reconfiguring the shelter system for single adults: shifting emphasis away from emergency shelter toward transitional housing and shelter, contingent upon participation in programs. Although the goal of reconfiguration is laudable — moving people through the system into secure housing and employment — one of its effects is to reduce the number of emergency shelter beds available in the central city from 300 to 110.[2] The planned closing of Recovery Inn in July 1995 — which is happening sooner than previously anticipated — will hasten this reduction. The City is planning on building more transitional housing to compensate for, and shift emphasis from, emergency shelter. Still, the overall trend is a reduction of shelter beds.

Insufficient space is not the only problem which prevents people from using shelters. Shelter life is fragmented; frequently people must return to the streets during daylight hours. Regimentation and lack of privacy also keep from some homeless people from entering facilities. In addition, people cannot stay in a shelter without separating from their partners or their pets.

For these and other reasons, approximately 1,000 people are currently camping within Multnomah County.[3] Of course, camping is not much better than staying in the shelters. Because camping is illegal in Portland, people who choose this option are criminals no matter how lawfully they conduct the rest of their lives. Campers are subject to arrest and fines; their possessions may be confiscated with little

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[1] Multnomah County Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy, 1994.

[2] City of Portland & Multnomah Co., A Proposal for a Restructured System of Housing and Services for Homeless Single Adults In Downtown Portland.

[3] Jolin & Connaughton, "Homeless bear unfair burden of camping-law enforcement". *The Oregonian*, July 8, 1994.

warning. In addition, they frequently face physical violence, unsanitary conditions, and freezing temperatures.

PART TWO: OUR EXPERIENCES

This section is a narrative of our experience in planning for homeless campers. The narrative is interspersed with recollections of individuals in the group.

Our group originally formed with the intention of performing a fairly straightforward, though difficult, planning task. We were interested in trying to site one or more homeless campgrounds somewhere in the Portland area. This would involve finding possible sites, getting the support of local businesses and residents, and addressing issues of finance, sanitation, and security, among others. We got the idea for this task from the City of Portland's Shelter Reconfiguration Plan, which suggested that the idea of a homeless campground, rejected by the City of Portland five years previously, needed more study. After talking to government workers, homeless advocates and social service workers about the idea, we realized that we needed to step back and study the underlying problems which created the possible need for a campground.

My first discussions with people about this project were with government workers and employees of non-profit housing corporations. These people were concerned that creating a campground would draw energy and resources away from the creation of housing, creating an attitude of "we don't need to worry about housing —they've got a nice campground now." Others stated that a previous Portland study of this idea had concluded that money would be more effectively spent on housing. Others were concerned that crime and the enabling of alcoholism and drug addiction made a campground a bad idea. Still others were very much against any camp which would accommodate children.

Although I sympathized with all these viewpoints and believed that our group might eventually reach the same conclusions, I wondered how these people squared their principles with reality. The fact is that families with children, as well as runaway teenagers, are already sleeping in unsafe, unsanitary spots in our city. For this reason I remained open to the idea of a campground. You can't just plan for the far future, you have to try to improve things in the short term.

Within the first week we'd decided to look broadly at the issues of homeless camping in Portland. Our goal was to learn about the situations confronting campers and to identify actions which might improve those situations.

One of the requirements of the class in which we were enrolled was to identify a client — someone who would help define our project, assist us in our work and, assumedly, carry out some of the recommendations which we made. We did talk to various people in government agencies about taking on this position. Most were interested in our results, but were not necessarily interested in being our client. Meanwhile, we started to think in terms of defining the homeless persons themselves as the client. We reasoned that this would motivate us to get input

directly from the campers and ensure that the alternatives we chose benefited them and not a government agency or advocacy group.

With no particular organization overly eager to take us on, the decision to choose the homeless people themselves as our client brought me to the realization that we were untouchable in a certain respect. The decision had been a tough one. But as students, we didn't have to answer to anyone except ourselves — and the homeless campers, of course.

Despite not seeking a government agency as a client, we did formalize our relationships with individuals we had met who were involved in service to, or advocacy for, campers. We invited such persons to join an advisory committee from whom we would seek advice and who we would inform of any alternatives that we identified. This group was helpful, especially in the early stages of the project, when we had to make some difficult decisions regarding direction and focus of the group.

One such decision involved which group of homeless campers to focus on and work with. We had initially identified three groups: single adults, families and youth. These populations are found to various extents in different parts of the Portland region, with families tending to camp in cars further from the downtown, youth tending to squat in abandoned buildings or stay with friends, and single adults often camping under bridges or in public parks. Based on the available information about these groups, we chose to work with single adults. We did so mostly because of the ethical concerns about promoting any type of camping for families with children or teenagers on their own. In addition, of the groups that we'd contacted, those most interested in our work were those that dealt mostly or exclusively with single adults.

We all understood that such a decision could not be taken lightly. It had to be an educated choice. My problem was that the more educated I became regarding these issues, the more guilty I felt in not addressing the problems of the other two groups involved. Truly, I began to doubt that the planning process was a good model to follow because in using it to make the decision, it seemed as though we were avoiding the responsibility to which we had committed ourselves to by adopting a justification of sorts under the auspices of planning.

Although sad in a way, the final determining factor which we based our decision upon was one of convenience. Of the different populations, the single adult segment was the most accessible. This outcome is ironic in a sense because, as one of our committee members pointed out to me, they definitely receive the most attention. Hence, they may not be the most in need of our services. But we were facing a limited timeline and if we really wanted to make a difference we had to go where we thought we could be the most effective. With this consideration in mind, I do believe that we made the right decision.

After choosing a group to work with, we began to meet some homeless campers. We did this primarily at the St. Francis Dining Hall in inner Southeast Portland, an establishment which feeds dinner to 200 or more low-income people six nights a week. Many of these people sleep outdoors at least some of the time. On our first visit, Peggy, the director of the hall held an informal meeting at which she introduced us to about half a dozen campers. We got to know some of these folks over the following weeks, some we did not talk to again.

At our first meeting I was pretty uncomfortable. I was very aware of how another group member started asking one of the campers right away about dumpster diving. Even among my own social group I'm hesitant to ask people about their work in case they are unemployed or something.

I was sitting at the table listening to a camper talk about a house where a bunch of folks had squatted for a while until it had burned down. On finding that he worked on bicycles, I told him that I was a bicyclist. He said he'd noticed my bike gloves threaded through the belt loop of my pants. Eager to make friends, and excited by the fact that I "was having a real conversation with a homeless camper," I introduced myself. There was no response to this, so I asked him his name. His only response was "I didn't say." I was embarrassed by this and I don't believe I've asked a homeless person their name since.

I did strike up an acquaintance with another camper. I visited him several times at St. Francis, where we would play cribbage. It was something we had in common and meant I didn't have to worry about conversation so much. I noticed, though, that when he made hateful, racist statements I was faced with a classical liberal's dilemma: when a homeless person suggests that the world would be a better place if all the Mexicans were lined up and shot, how should I react? I decided not to worry about it, and just consider it part of my education.

In general, I find conversing with the campers kind of hard. I feel that they spend more time talking about the present than I. Maybe it's just that their present is different enough from mine that I notice this.

Another member of our group discovered something that made communication easier:

When I was first introduced to some of the campers at the St. Francis dining hall, I was unsure of how to engage them in conversation. I wanted to get to know them, and I wanted them to get to know me, but breaking down that initial barrier seemed extremely difficult. How would I strike up a conversation? What topics could I address, so early on in my relationship with the campers? I grew disappointed at the prospect that our initial contacts with our client would seem like a series of embarrassing first dates.

I then remembered that campers often have dogs, and that the dogs are very much like their family. I like dogs, too, and enjoy talking to people about their dogs, so I began to use this subject to open conversations. It was an easy subject to start, as everyone was more than happy to talk about their "children." It also proved to be a topic which allowed me to gain insights into the campers' lifestyles, their problems and concerns with personal security, and their relationships with other campers. Because their dogs were so much a part of their lives, it helped break down the initial barriers and let other information flow more naturally.

About half way through our project we visited a car camp for homeless people in Eugene, which was set up using city, state, and county funds. We were still considering the viability of such a camp, although no longer trying to site one. Our hostess in Eugene was a local homeless advocate, although she was housed. She took us to a rather colorful night spot frequented, owned, and run by homeless people. She also gave us a very subjective and negative account of the situation at the car camp. We spent the night at her house before visiting the camp the next morning.

Perhaps my darkest memory of our project was our visit to the Eugene car camp. It was a depressing scene, probably made worse by the dismal weather and the cheap diner breakfast burning in my gut. The camp was just a section of blacktopped parking lot, with orderly camping spaces full of decrepit motor homes, broken-down school buses, and listing vans. Everything looked soggy and gray. Many of the campers we met seemed uncaring and resigned. Was this indicative of all homeless camping, or just government-sanctioned camps? I was unsure. But I was sure that this was not part of the solution.

The rest of our group agreed on this. Over the course of the trip we also agreed that we would not only recommend some alternatives, but that we would actually try to implement some of them. This decision was driven by the fact that we had no formal client, and by our belief that if we were not the ones to implement these alternatives they would probably not be implemented .

Some of the more active participants in our advisory committee were members of two local homeless advocacy groups: The Homeless Persons' Legal Issues Task Force (HPLITF), an organization which advocates for the legal rights of homeless people, and JOIN, an educational group which works to increase awareness of homeless issues among the housed community. HPLITF served to educate our group in different ways. They showed us videos of campsites and of the same camps being "swept" by ODOT. One member of our group went out with an HPLITF member to monitor a sweep. This is a program started by HPLITF in which concerned citizens accompany the police and observe the sweep.

The police had posted the sign stating that a sweep would take place within 24 hours, the police were going to give these campers 48 hours with the condition that they clean up their camp.

One member of the Task Force had called to let me know when we would be going to observe this sweep. I wondered if the people would still be in the camp which I had been to once before.

I was worried about what would happen. What confrontation would take place if any?

We got to the site at about 8:30 a.m. and climbed over a fenced wall, ran over two lanes of freeway traffic, and climbed a short hill covered with ivy. The sun was out but it was slightly windy and still cold. This was the middle of a cold spell; winter had just started. When we got to the camp, I was relieved to see only one person there.

The place had been cleaned up since I was there about four days before. The police met us before we went to the camp. If the garbage was cleaned up, they would not force the campers here to move some place else.

One person in our group went out on his own looking for camps, using information he got from campers and advocates.

*The most intense experience that I have had these last several months has been the result of tromping around in the bushes into vacant lots and under freeways to try to find some of the encampments that might be relevant to our project. Often the conditions of these places were barely tolerable. Upon approach, the first quality that struck me was the abundance of trash. With closer inspection I discovered that the bivouac itself may have been nothing more than a hole dug into the dirt. Of course, since these dwellings were in regular use, the dust was incredibly fine, although in some places it appeared to be saturated with grease because of the cooking activity in evidence. If the place was located under a freeway ramp,which was often the case, the space was confined to no more than a few feet. And with the concrete directly overhead, the soot had often built up and this, when taken together with the close proximity of excrement, gave the nook an almost unbearable odor. The impression I was left with was that an individual living at this level of subsistence must face some serious obstacles when trying to relate with mainstream society. And when considering the fact that liquor bottles and hypodermic needles were often in abundance, these individuals could be said to face a serious cultural handicap.**

JOIN conducts regular immersions in which housed people visit camp sites, volunteer in soup kitchens or other agencies serving the homeless, and share meals with campers. Two members of our group participated in a day long immersion:

One incident which provided a glimpse of the cultural differences between us and campers occurred when I was put into the position of serving a meal to homeless recipients as part of the immersion process. The event took place at a prominent soup kitchen in downtown Portland and my job was to bus the tables as the diners

finished their meals so that another customer could immediately take that person's place. The line of hungry customers went around the block and so the pressure was really on to move your people in and out as quickly as possible. Understandably, the atmosphere of the place was one in which customers would eat as fast as they could, often to the extent that they would even take parts of their meal with them as they made their exit. At one point during the shift I rushed to an empty seat at a table and was about to clear the dirty dishes when I noticed that the person who had been sitting there had left his coat handing over the side of the chair. Not wanting to clear the setting until I was sure that the person was finished, I turned to a woman sitting at the table and asked if she knew whether he was still there. The response I got was one that really threw me for a loop. She exclaimed that she didn't see anyone sitting there, and in her anger went on to tell me that, among other things, just because she was homeless didn't mean she was stupid. My response was just to apologize, clean up the table, and leave.

There is no doubt that as individuals we occupied different subcultures with different norms of behavior. My perspective was based on my experience where going out for a meal is a recreational activity. Hence, the dining experience is meant to be enjoyed as much as the food. And having waited tables for several years, I have become very aware of dining etiquette and so assumed that when the customer had left his seat, the fact that he had left his jacket behind was a sign that he had left momentarily and would return to finish his meal. From her perspective, however, this experience was meant to serve one purpose only, and that was to eat. Of course my question would have seemed absurd to her. What other reason could I have in asking it but to mock her position?

During the immersion, we also visited the camp under the Ross Island Bridge:

I suppose that I may have romanticized the camp sites a bit before visiting them. This was partly because the campers speak rather proudly of them and because I had seen a video which showed one rather complex camp under the bridge, with carved walls and lots of possessions. Although some of these features in fact exist, the reality is depressing. The camp of one guy who I'd gotten to know somewhat was just a little flat spot in the dirt surrounded by what looked like junk to me. He had spoken quite well of this site and of how clean it was.

I did love meeting the dogs. The ones that I saw were in great shape and very friendly (although campers tend to talk about the fierceness of their dogs). I also saw *three very contented-looking cats who watched us from their perch as we walked around the camp. These pets made the otherwise dismal nature of the camp more bearable for me.*

Conversations with members of advocacy groups also served to bring up issues which might not have occurred to us. Communication with these groups was more advantagous than working directly with campers in that advocacy groups are more used to thinking in terms of advocacy and problem solving, whereas the campers

are so familiar with their day-to-day problems that they may not even think to mention them. One such problem is that of storage:

There is a problem with a lack of storage for campers to leave their stuff while they look for jobs or take care of personal business. I talked with JOIN staff about east side space. They had tried JOIN offices and St. Francis Dining Hall but it got to be too much stuff. There was a place on the west side but it closed when the building got blown up and burned down. I suggested finding space to be donated on the east side. JOIN staff thought it would be good idea, but after a while it was put on back burner with idea of camp cleanup more of a priority.

Of course, working with advocacy groups was one step removed from the campers themselves and meant that we were allowing somebody else to interpret situations. However, given our short time span, and the close ties between these groups and the homeless camper community (some of the members of HPLITF are recently homeless campers), we felt that this was a risk worth taking.

One of the alternatives which our group chose to implement was that of a "visioning" with the HPLITF (the alternatives are discussed further in a later section). We invited all the key players in the Task Force, as well as six homeless campers who we hoped would want to get involved in the organization, to participate. Several of the Task Force members did not attend, but four of the campers did come to the meeting.

The best part was driving the campers to and from the meeting. The meeting itself was somewhat productive and it was good to see the campers getting involved in an organization which could promote their interests. On the other hand, a lot of the meeting was devoted to complaining and telling stories about issues not very related to the "visioning".

Another alternative was the formulation of a Good Neighbor Plan aimed at cleaning the area around the camp under the Ross Island Bridge. At the beginning of this process, one of our members took a train ride along the tracks below the area to be cleaned. On this ride were neighborhood association members, an assistant to City Commissioner Gretchen Kafoury, members of the Bureau of Police, and a representative from the Oregon Department of Transportation, which owns the property where the campers live.

The train ride was very interesting and quite a study in contrasting viewpoints. As we rode past the campsites, some of us waved and smiled to the campers; others snarled with disgust or watched with quiet repulsion. Near the end of the campsites, we stopped the train and everyone talked about their perspective on the problem. It was very tense, at times confrontational, and we were all captives of the train, somewhat stranded and a good hike from where we originated. After hearing the train owner and the police talk quite negatively about the campers, I felt angry

and slightly helpless. What were we getting into? Faced with strongly-held stereotypes and strong opposition, what could we be expected to do?

The third alternative that we chose to implement was a video about homeless campers and their campsites. We did all the filming in one day, visiting sites which we'd found out about in the previous weeks. It was two days after a snowstorm — a fairly unusual event in Portland. Tromping through the snow added an extra dimension of adventure and strangeness to walking along and across the freeways to the camps.

One issue that we were always very sensitive to was campers' privacy. When we went down to the Ross Island Bridge camp to film for the video, we made sure we had permission by campers to go into their campsites. Those campsites which we did not have permission to film, we left alone. We knew that some of the campers had been upset when, several months earlier, a news crew went underneath the bridge and began filming. While the crew was within their legal rights to take footage on public property, the campers felt their privacy had been violated. How would we like it if an uninvited news crew came through the front door of our house and started filming? We hoped that by honoring the requests of the campers, they would be more trusting of us in the long run, and I think we were right.

We are now done with the school part of the project although we will continue to work, at least until our chosen alternatives have been followed through to completion. We feel that we've probably done some good, but we know that we still have lots to learn about the people who live outdoors in Portland.

Being in school, you're always having to reach conclusions, to act like an expert. You explore a subject for ten weeks — mostly in the classroom and through the written word. You then write a paper or make a presentation that implies a conviction that you don't necessarily feel. Unfortunately, this present document is no exception. Therefore, at this point, I want to loudly declare, "I am not an expert on homelessness."

I don't want to be an expert on homelessness, because that would mean being homeless. Our group tried to do the right things and we probably helped a little. I had some interesting experiences and learned about a part of the life of the city that I hadn't known about before. Now when I walk along freeways I look for camps. I see them in places that I'd walked by many times before and just never noticed.

We were recently asked by an Oregonian reporter to share some of the information we had gathered. Although we are willing to do so — if it does not involve a breach of confidence — we encouraged him to get in touch with JOIN and go on an immersion. Our insistence on this matter reflected an ideal which the members of our group have come to share: go and find out for yourself. You still won't really understand what it means to be homeless, but you probably won't ever forget what you do learn.

PART THREE: ALTERNATIVES

This section contains alternatives we identified. The first part lists those which we decided to implement.

Chosen Alternatives

These are the three alternatives which we identified and decided to act upon.

Garbage Clean-up Agreement for the Ross Island Bridge Camp

There is currently a large amount of trash on the hillside which lies between Highway 99 and the Willamette River south of the Ross Island Bridge. The garbage is generated primarily by the campers living underneath the bridge, but is also the result of possessions being thrown down the hill during Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) camp sweeps, as well as other illegal dumping activities.

Several groups are interested in cleaning up the site. SamTrac, a traction company, owns the rail line which runs parallel to the river. SamTrac has complained that the trash is a visual concern as well as a liability because they have to remove those items which fall down onto the rail right-of-way. The Brooklyn neighborhood has expressed concerns as to how the trash affects the neighborhood's image, and would like to see it removed. Finally, the campers themselves are disgusted with the problem and would like to have a cleaner living space.

Our group has been instrumental in coordinating an effort to organize a clean-up of the camp site and the hillside, and has been working with Portland City Commissioner Kafoury's office, the Police Department, the District Attorney's office, JOIN, and ODOT, in addition to the groups listed above. We have asked for, and received, a commitment by the City to place a six month moratorium on sweeps of the Ross Island Bridge camp, provided it is kept clean.

Currently, we are organizing the interested parties so that we may create a "Good Neighbor Policy" to be signed by all the groups. The agreement will provide for the cooperation to complete the initial clean-up, as well as for a method to keep the camp clean in the future (most likely through regular garbage service). In return for keeping the camp and the hillside clean, the City, ODOT and the Brooklyn neighborhood will not request a camp sweep in the next six months.

We chose this alternative for three reasons. First, it met our criteria of immediacy — the plan should be in place and the cleanup completed by early April of this year. Second, the agreement can serve as a model for other areas with similar concerns. Finally, it demonstrates the type of cooperation among city bureaus, housed communities, and campers which is essential in seeking solutions to the homeless camping issue.

Visioning for the Homeless Persons' Legal Issues Task Force

The Task Force has been instrumental in raising consciousness about homeless camping issues in the last two years. Their advocacy led the City's revised camp sweep policies, which now require 24 hour notice before a sweep occurs, as well as camper access to property seized during sweeps. The Task Force instituted a monitoring program where private citizens accompany police on sweeps to help assure fair treatment of the campers and their property. They are also responsible for the recent hiring by Transition Projects of an outreach worker to bring social service information into the camps.

Recently the Task Force has suffered a loss of leadership and direction. They have also lost many of their homeless members, who have either become housed or simply dropped out of the organization. For these reasons, the Task Force asked our group if we would help them regain their focus.

This alternative was chosen because it met two of our criteria. First, we are dedicated to working in ways which will continue to benefit campers after our group has disbanded. Strengthening an existing advocacy group is an example of such work. Second, the involvement of the campers, four of whom came to the meeting, is one of our priorities.

Video About Homeless Campers

We believe that planners working on this issue must make special efforts to educate the general public about the lives of homeless campers in Portland. For this reason we shot a video which includes footage of camps and interviews with past and present campers. We hope that it will be used by educational organizations such as JOIN in their efforts to personalize the camping issue for the housed population. Our rough cut of this video has already generated significant interest among groups and individuals who deal with this issue. They have stated that it will be a useful tool in illuminating issues faced by campers.

Further Alternatives

These are alternatives that we have identified but have not tried to implement.

Legalize Camping

Our understanding is that the camping ordinance is not enforced per se, in that people are not ticketed for camping. Instead camps are swept — once or twice a year in the case of the Ross Island Bridge camp. A 24-hour notice is posted, campers leave the camp, their possessions are confiscated, and the campers return within a few days. The law seems to serve no other purpose than to disrupt the lives of campers and force them to reacquire their basic possessions and renovate their living space.

Certainly there are problems associated with campsites, such as garbage or public drunkenness (although it is not very public under the Ross Island Bridge). However, there are sanitation and public nuisance laws already in place to deal with such problems.

Decriminalization is the acknowledgment that homelessness is not in and of itself a crime. It is a first step in the recognition that homelessness is the result of social forces. Hopefully, it will pave the way toward more positive actions. It is not in itself a solution, rather a beginning, but it is hard to see how significant progress can be made without it.

Increase Communication With Campers

The campers we spoke to often expressed the wish that City officials would engage the campers — "just sit down and talk with us." We heartily endorse this idea. City officials should go on immersions with JOIN, eat lunch at Sisters of the Road Cafe, or participate in similar activities, whether or not they see themselves as involved with issues of homelessness. Homelessness is a huge problem and it will take a broad commitment from many sectors and levels of government to end it. One way to infuse this commitment is to personalize homelessness for the individuals who make up government. After they meet someone who lives under a bridge and who reminds them of their daughter, or their father, or who just makes them laugh, they will be more inclined to use their individual and combined power to do something to end homelessness. This goes both ways. Homeless persons need chances to learn that government officials do not exist merely to make their lives more difficult.

Allow Pets and Couples in Homeless Shelters

Many of the campers that we met have pets to whom they are devoted. Some of the campers also have partners with whom they live. Entering a shelter would mean forsaking these relationships. At a minimum shelters should be made more

accommodating to people with pets or partners. This would go a long ways toward making the shelters less institutional and more humane.

Create Designated Homeless Campgrounds

Actually, we are not sure that we would advocate for such an alternative. The conversations that we had with various persons who have had experience with such campgrounds — campers, government officials and social service workers — led us to conclude that the money required to implement them is probably better spent in developing permanent affordable housing.

This argument, of course, holds true for any interim alternative, but it seems especially cogent when applied to a fairly expensive project such as a campground. At Eugene's car camp for homeless people, for example, operating costs run at around $90,000 a year, which would be enough money to build a few units of affordable housing. The Eugene camp has forty-five sites and is open for seven months from winter to spring. Costs are estimated at about $300 a month per space, which would be enough to place people in low-cost apartments.

Create Storage Facilities for Homeless Campers

This might be a profitable business for someone. Homeless people need safe places to keep their belongings, especially during the day when they are out and about.

Increase Campers' Access to Social Services

The City recently hired a part-time, temporary outreach worker to visit the camps and inform campers about social service options. If campers take advantage of this information, hopefully outreach services will be expanded.

Campers are sometimes frustrated by the difficulty of applying for services in a number of different places and by the requirements for items such as identification and a home address. One way to ameliorate some of these problems might be to create a "one-stop" social service application center (much as the Bureau of Planning has done) where the special problems faced by campers can be addressed. Another possibility might be to provide occasional transportation from designated pickup spots to the various social service agencies.

Increase Involvement in Homeless Issues by Portland State University

This group is testimony to the fact that some students are willing to dedicate time, thought and energy to working on issues of homelessness. We would like to see more energy expended toward institutionalizing this desire. A model to follow might be Portland State University's Institute on Aging, whose staff generate grants to study issues and policies designed to benefit the elderly. If applied to the homeless population, this might be an effective approach.

Education

Nothing will happen without educating more people about homelessness. We all need to spend more time understanding the issues of homelessness. The problem is how to start. Where does education begin? How do we sow the seeds of interest in other people's dilemmas? The answer is the same as it has always been. We have to start with ourselves and work our way out. We need to talk to homeless people and then talk to our families and loved ones and the people we work with. We need to tell them that the homeless are like us, only they don't have houses.

Include Homeless Persons in Government Committees and Community Groups

Homeless persons should be included on more government decision-making boards. JOIN has a program designed to prepare campers for such positions.

Further, there needs to be broader recognition of homeless people as community members and more attempts to include them in community activities. Many of the campers we spoke to had lived in their neighborhood for several years.

Develop Regional Plans for Homeless Persons and Affordable Housing

Metro has stated an intent in the Regional Urban Growth Goals and Objectives (RUGGOs) to assess the availability of low and moderate cost housing in the Metro region and to develop strategies for land use policies which will improve identified housing shortages. We suggest that there is already documentation available which identifies substantial needs for such housing throughout the Metro Region. Such data can be found in the Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategies for Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington. We encourage Metro to develop the land use policies mentioned in the RUGGOs as soon as possible.

This last alternative addresses the overarching issue of homelessness, which is the lack of low-cost housing to meet the needs of low-income people. If this alternative is carried through, many of the others would become irrelevant.

PART FOUR: ISSUES CONFRONTING PLANNERS WORKING WITH HOMELESS CAMPERS

This section lists broad issues surrounding homeless camping which we encountered at the beginning of the project and which were a consideration throughout.

Political Context of Planning for Homeless Campers

When working with homeless campers in Portland, it is crucial to keep two facts in mind. The first is that there is a critical shortage of affordable housing in the Portland region. The second is that camping is illegal in Portland. This means that if a person has a reason for not using the shelter system — and there are quite a few good reasons — becoming homeless often means becoming a criminal.

These two facts indicate the difficulties faced in planning for homeless campers, which is different than planning for more accepted ends such as siting a light rail line. In the latter case, the public has voted its support for light rail and the government will devote significant resources to siting the lines, as well as to building the line once it has been sited. In effect, there is a mandate to plan for light rail. No comparable mandate exists for planning to improve the lives of homeless campers.

Because of this broad lack of interest in solving the problems faced by homeless campers, planners who choose to address the situation may find themselves assuming unfamiliar roles. In order to plan they must first convince citizens and government that planning is necessary. In order to do this, planners will first have to help educate government and citizens as to the needs of campers. Hence, they will have to act as advocates for the campers before they can plan.

If planners are able to convince their fellow citizens that the needs of campers are worthy of a systematic search for solutions, then we will no longer have to act as advocates. In this sense, planners such as ourselves are advocates for planning as much as we are advocates for illegal campers.

Long-term Versus Short Term Goals

The ideal solution to the homeless camping dilemma is the housing of all who wish to be housed. There are some who believe that we should pursue only this long-term goal. They advocate any plans which make camping more comfortable or acceptable should not be pursued because they "institutionalize" camping and allow us to put off the long-term goal.

We recognize this dilemma and believe that it is therefore vital that anyone who works on this issue keeps this ultimate goal in mind. However, it is also important to realize that this goal will not be reached for years. People are camping now, and

are subject to arrest, theft and unsanitary conditions now. Therefore, short-term solutions to these unacceptable conditions must be sought now. Ideally these short-term solutions will also help pave the way for more permanent ones by increasing awareness and demonstrating ways in which all of us can work together to improve the lives of homeless campers.

The Enabling Issue

Planners attempting to work with homeless campers will no doubt run into the "enabling" issue. This is the concern that government money should not be spent that will allow some homeless persons to continue to live their present "self-destructive" lifestyles.

It seems that such concerns are applied more rigorously to homeless persons than they are to other segments of society which receive government subsidies. It cannot be denied that some, perhaps many, homeless persons engage in destructive activities such as excessive alcohol or drug use. On the other hand, our society is perhaps less concerned with the extent that government subsidies, such as homeowner income tax deductions, may allow these homeowners to engage in the same self-destructive behaviors.

Nevertheless, "enabling" is a common concern and needs to be recognized by planners working on this issue. It is especially important to recognize these types of concerns within ourselves, for they will affect how we react to homeless campers.

PART FIVE: METHODOLOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

This section contains recommendations for planners working on the issue of homeless camping.

Work With the Campers

Because planners taking on the issue of homeless camping want their work to be of benefit to homeless campers, our primary suggestion is that, as much as possible, they let the campers themselves be a touchstone, a source of information, and a reality check. Planners must test their assumptions against camper's experiences. They must not rely only on "experts" who work in buildings downtown when they can talk to those who live on the streets.

Planners must spend a lot of time with campers in various environments. At first this may involve simply being in the same public places as campers. When it becomes appropriate, planners should visit their camps, visit the places where campers eat and hang out during the day, and ask to go with them on their scavenging rounds. If other planners are like us, this will be uncomfortable at first and quite rewarding as time passes.

Meeting Campers in Their Locales

It is fairly easy to make contact with campers since they spend almost all of their time on public property. Our group made many of our contacts through the St. Francis Dining Hall in inner Southeast Portland. This was an excellent place to meet campers, since it opens early in the afternoon and many people are there for hours before the daily meal is served. The staff at St. Francis had good relationships with the campers and introduced us to several folk with whom we developed closer relationships. Sisters of the Road Cafe in Old Town is another comfortable spot with a helpful staff where a person could meet campers. Planners working on this issue in other cities should seek out places such as these.

Getting to Know the Campers

Planners should not try to work on the homeless camping issue unless they are willing to spend a fair amount of time getting to know the campers on an informal basis. This means starting slowly and taking one's time. Showing up with a survey, or trying to immediately organize a focus groups will not work, because you won't know how to ask the questions or what to focus on. Instead, bring some cigarettes or cards or other items which can help establish relationships. Or just bring something to read while you get more comfortable with your surroundings.

We found that hanging out at the Dining Hall was quite pleasant once we got over our initial shyness. Many people there are in no hurry and you will find that some people, as in all situations, are quite eager to tell you about themselves.

Ideally, with this type of planning, one will spend a considerable amount of time just hanging out around the campers before one even begins to try to achieve anything in terms of planning goals.

Our group also found two books which were helpful in providing insights into the lives of homeless campers. One such work is The Bridge People, by Jackson Underwood, an anthropological account based on two years of extensive interaction (participant observation) with campers in Los Angeles. Another is Travels with Lizbeth by Lars Eighner, a beautifully-written and fascinating account of the writer's three year's of homelessness, much of which was spent living in parks and along freeways.

Working With Existing Advocacy Groups

Two Portland groups which work on homeless issues, JOIN and the Homeless Persons' Legal Issues Task Force, were invaluable resources in our efforts to work with homeless campers. JOIN is an educational organization which conducts weekly "immersions" during which groups visit soup kitchens, shelters and camps where they get to spend time with campers and other homeless persons. On longer immersions people have the chance to sleep under the bridge with the campers.

The Homeless Persons' Legal Issues Task Force (HPLITF) is an advocacy group which fights for to expand the legal rights of homeless campers (and homeless people in general). Through them we met some current and former campers.

Working with such groups is important for at least two reasons. First, they can introduce planners to campers who are used to talking to interested outsiders, and are thus more accessible. For example, through the Task Force we met an articulate individual who was camping until a few months ago but is now housed. His ability to "bridge the gap" between these two worlds was very helpful. Second, these organizations are dedicated to working on camping issues and the alternatives you develop should attempt to utilize and empower them. After all, they may be here after you have moved on to other issues, and since there are few government resources devoted to planning for homeless campers, it is important that your plans take into account the needs and strengths of these groups. Planners working in other cities should attempt to find similar groups in their area.

Cultural Differences

At times we felt like we were working with people whose cultural norms differed from our own. Campers sleep outside, they get much of their food and possessions out of other people's garbage, and some of them have outstanding arrest warrants. Because of this last characteristic, some campers may not want to talk to strangers. Their day-to-day existence seemingly causes campers to think more in present terms

than do housed individuals. This presents an obvious challenge to planners who spend a lot of time thinking about the future.

These differences are another reason for going slow. On the whole, however, we did not find them to be much of an obstacle to communication. Our commonalties greatly outweighed our differences.

Another Bureaucrat?

The homeless people with whom we worked were somewhat used to people from local government and non-profit agencies coming to them and asking how they could be helped. For this reason the campers were somewhat jaded, and stated so at one of our first meetings. On other occasions, campers expressed skepticism that government agencies, especially the police department, could be trusted to keep agreements. Therefore, avoid making promises that you may not be able to keep.

Establishing More Formal Communications

We have held two or three scheduled events which some of the campers have attended. As with all groups, it looks like a few people are interested in our planning project, while most have more immediate concerns. Dealing with the resulting self-selection is probably as important and as difficult as it is with other planning processes.

Working With a Selected Population or Geographical Area

Our group originally intended to address the issues of a broad group of homeless campers which would include families, youth, and single adults/couples. We quickly realized that given our time and resource limitations, such a scope was impossible and so we focused only on the last group. Within this group we dealt almost exclusively with campers who eat at the St. Francis Dining Hall.

Hopefully, in the future more comprehensive efforts will attempt to plan for all of the above populations within a regional context. A regional approach is certainly more desirable than a limited one, provided the resources are available. Such a study would be able to address issues such as in-migration which might result from more humane treatment of campers within this region, or the intraregional transience of homeless campers. It would be able to take advantage of sub-regional assets.

However, if resources are limited, we suggest that planners adopt a narrow approach and try to achieve focused results. Over time, such results will hopefully create a body of planning examples which can ultimately contribute to a more regional approach. In addition many of the planning tools that are developed may be portable to a broader context, e.g., models for developing partnerships between businesses, housed communities, and homeless groups.

Selecting and Implementing Alternatives

Our group originally set out with the intention of identifying ways to improve the present situations of illegal campers. We soon realized, due to the lack of a planning mandate mentioned in the first section of this document, that if we did not try to implement some of these ideas, they would probably not be implemented at all. We thus moved quickly through the criteria and alternative identification stages and onto the implementation phase.

Such precipitous action caused a fair amount of nervousness on our part. We countered this by choosing focused tasks suggested by our interactions with the campers and the two advocacy organizations.

We chose to implement three alternatives which fell into two categories. The first type are those that, although their implementation would not immediately change the situations of campers, are designed to ultimately facilitate such changes through education and organization building. These alternatives relate back to the "advocacy for planning" discussion in the fourth section of this document. The second type are more traditional planning tasks, which directly address our goal by bringing together stakeholders to address an identified area of mutual concern.

CONCLUSION

We hope that our work has been helpful, both in improving the lives of some of the campers we met and in raising awareness of issues surrounding homeless camping. We hope that a combination of small efforts such as this will ultimately lead to the realization of the greater goal: housing all who desire to be housed.

We realize that as students we were given a unique opportunity — the opportunity to work with this issue more or less on our own terms. We understand that not all planners have this kind of freedom in their work. Nevertheless, we encourage them to look for opportunities to go out and explore the world in which homeless campers live. We think that both individual planners and the planning profession will be strengthened and enriched by such efforts.

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