

Colopy: The social and safety debate on homeless encampments



The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority on Thursday, Sept. 8, released the results of its 2022 point-in-time homeless count, which took place earlier this year. The survey took place across LA County, including in the Long Beach area — but not in Long Beach itself. That city conducted its own homeless count, the results of which came out in July. This Aug. 20, 2021, file photo shows the 710 Freeway offramp to downtown Long Beach lined with a homeless encampment just across from the giant letters welcoming people to the city. (File photo by Brittany Murray, Press-Telegram/SCNG)

By [CONTRIBUTING WRITER](#) | |

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There is a huge social and safety debate going on about homeless encampments.

The Long Beach health department, along with other city departments, receives calls daily to request we clean them up and move people who are living there. I understand why the calls are coming in. For many in our city, seeing a row of tents along an urban riverbed, on a freeway offramp or clustered in a park creates a negative reaction. I also understand that for many people who are unhoused, this is their home, at least for the moment.

Encampments are a community, a neighborhood, where there is some sense of belonging without constantly having to feel like an “other” or an outsider.

Some would argue that encampments should be illegal, but that has the same impact as criminalizing poverty, behavioral health challenges and disabilities. Others would argue that you shouldn’t touch encampments at all and, instead, just let the people who are living there simply be.

This, however, comes with a perception of neglecting community members who are in crisis, who need supportive services and care. It also causes concern for the health and safety of all residents.

None of this is simple and it requires balance.

For instance, let’s talk about encampment cleanups. Encampments, particularly those that have been around for a while, can be unhealthy because of a lack of running water, toilets and other basic needs. This can lead to communicable diseases and rodents, as well as excessive trash and other debris.





Kelly Colopy, director of the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services.
(Photo courtesy of the City of Long Beach)

If you are housed and reading this, imagine if your home didn't have any running water and you had no toilet and no trash cans or trash collection. And that was the



Cleaning encampments greatly reduces public health risks for people living there, as well as identifies strategies to address basic needs and trash reduction. We did more than 1,000 encampment clean-ups of all different sizes in the past year across the city.

Our process, as required by law, is to post a sign that a cleanup will happen after 48 hours of notification. During that time, our outreach teams work closely with those living in the encampment to connect them to services and shelter if they are willing to participate. The timeframe allows for the encampment residents to gather their belongings, which they can either take with them or have us store if they engage in a housing opportunity. Anything that is left is cleaned up.

This cleaning process, however, is very disruptive.

As noted, encampments are communities and they provide a measure of comfort and safety for those living there. Some of these communities are long-established in one form or another. Dispersing the members of a community, especially among people who are not willing to accept shelter and services, means sleeping somewhere new, in an unlocked tent or out in the open, without knowing the people around you.

This presents a challenge because, although we don't want anyone ending up in this situation, the health factors in unsanitary encampments must be addressed. So we must walk into this space, literally and figuratively, with empathy and compassion and the willingness to help people transition into housing as the space is cleaned.

Earlier this year, the city received a \$1.3 million encampment resolution funding grant from the state, which is being used to conduct comprehensive outreach, supportive services and shelter services for the encampment site clustered in Cambodia Town around MacArthur Park and the Mark Twain Neighborhood Library.

The encampment in Cambodia Town was made up of more than 50 people who had lived in the general area for extended periods of time. We knew a clean-up had the possibility of being very disruptive and worked with the people experiencing homelessness at that encampment to determine their needs before any action was taken.

Needs included accessing public assistance benefits, substance use and mental health treatment, case management, and housing. When someone was willing to accept services, we were able to either meet those needs directly ourselves as a city



The goal was to make the park and library area more accessible to the entire community and to clean and disinfect spaces, all while making sure the long-term houseless residents there had options.

One person, who we'll call Sara, lived unhoused in the area for two years. She grew up in the Anaheim Corridor, bouncing from one foster family to another. The foster care-to-prison pipeline is well known, and Sara's experience was no different. Without the safety net of a home base or economic stability, she became homeless and turned to illegal activities to survive.

When she was released from a two-year prison stint, she found her way to the encampment in Cambodia Town.

Outreach workers from the health department and their partners, including our Police Department's Quality of Life team, worked with her on her substance use addiction and mental health troubles. By the time the encampment was cleared, she had built a strong support system that included the outreach team and her faith group. Now, in interim housing, she is relieved of the burdens of street living and can focus on continuing to build herself up.

Not every story is a success story, though, and what works for one will not work for another.

If there's one thing I've learned in my many years of experience, it's that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to homelessness. What is certain, though — despite all the debate on TV news, across the dinner table and from neighbor to neighbor — is that we will keep addressing it, whether the work is in encampments or one-on-one with community members who are unhoused.

For your part, I ask that you please, when you see those tents, understand that there are real people, with real needs, living there and we are working very hard alongside them to get them to a more stable and settled place in the near- and long-term future.

Kelly Colopy is the director of the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services.

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