Striving for Balance: Hospitality & Safety on Our Beloved Grounds

Kathy Stamper, FUUSB Board of Trustees

The beloved green space on which our meeting house sits once belonged to the Abenaki (*pronounced ah-BEN-ah-kee*) people. It is ours to borrow, to nurture, to protect, and to share with our community. As we strive to be a welcoming and supportive community resource, it is important to consider the safety and emotional well-being of all who use this space, including our dedicated staff, members, tenants, neighbors and guests.

Several FUUSB board members walked our property with Blake, our new Facilities Manager, on a hot July afternoon. Blake is a skilled and caring individual committed to tending to the maintenance and preservation needs of our meeting house and its grounds. Stories emerged of Blake and other staff encountering used syringes and other human refuse from guests on our property who experience substance use disorder, mental health challenges and/or houselessness. Our staff, Narcan in hand, are frequently put in the uncomfortable position of having to ask individuals actively using drugs on our property to leave.

From our staff: *"... 7:45 a.m. this morning moving eight folks doing heroin and packing up from sleeping on the porch at 30 Elmwood last night. Thankfully, the last guy walked off just before the tenants arrived."*

Impacts on our beloved grounds include property damage (e.g., external electrical outlet broken into, forced entry, trash, human waste, etc.) and injury (e.g., a property guest's dog attacked one of our parking tenants, tearing their pants). Additionally, bushes have been cut down and more signage has been added to discourage drug use and weapons. Staff are managing these stressful and potentially traumatizing dynamics amid already very full job descriptions.

FUUSB owns several adjacent properties and rents out its parking spaces during the week. Blake is frequently contacted by these tenants to listen to safety concerns and/or be asked to "pick up a needle" left on a porch. Some tenants have hinted they may vacate, risking valuable funding streams for the FUUSB. The picnic table under the trees was removed after Clarke Street neighbors complained of loud, late-night gatherings that disturbed their sleep.

The FUUSB is well-positioned to embrace radical hospitality in this time of so much societal vulnerability: Our meeting house rests between the Howard Center's safe and free needle exchange site on Clarke Street and the much-needed Elmwood Emergency Shelter Community. We are a green oasis in the middle.

How do we balance hospitality with safety? One board member said it well: *"It's important to create a space where ALL feel welcome and safe."* How might we do this? We encourage folks to visit and use the FUUSB green space not only on Sundays, but during the week. You can bring folding chairs and meet a friend for lunch or a take-out cup of coffee. If you wish, you can also check in with Blake to learn how to safely collect drug paraphernalia, to help to keep the space safe. When you're there, interacting positively with other guests on the property becomes an extension of our beloved community.

The FUUSB Board may be contacted at Board@uusociety.org.