

Editorial: Homeless need safe place while help arrives

By American-Statesman Editorial Board

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The city's own ordinances prohibit overnight camping in parks. But the tents have popped up anyway in Austin parks and trails for the same reason homeless encampments have become entrenched along the highways: Our city has nowhere better to send most people who are homeless.

A year and a half have passed since Austin lifted its ban on homeless camping, and the city has done too little to address the consequences of that decision. Indeed, the lament of parks officials today echoes the concerns police officers have raised for years: Where should we tell homeless people to go?

Two summers ago we supported the council's decision to halt citations for homeless people. Writing tickets wasn't ending homelessness, only shuffling people around and sticking them with fines and warrants that put them deeper in the hole.

But we urged the city then — and we implore it now — to quickly identify appropriate places for homeless people to be. As we noted in the summer of 2019: “We’re not talking about apartments that will become available months or years from now ... though those things are critically important. We’re talking about the question of where people should sleep tonight, and next week, and for the months it might take before various agencies can help them find housing.”

It is not an act of kindness to let people live in tents perched along busy roadways, or nestled in drainage areas, or tucked along trails. To the contrary, it represents a failure to accept reality and act with urgency.

True, Austin has been buying motels to convert into housing for people exiting homelessness. Between the three motels it has bought and a fourth it plans to acquire, the city expects to create about 300 apartments.

But many of those units won't be available until later this year. And at last count, Austin had nearly 1,600 people sleeping outside. Experts believe the actual number is even higher.

We see encouraging signs City Hall is now at least willing to consider designated camp sites. Officials shunned the idea in 2019, insisting the best way to solve homelessness was to place people directly into shelter beds or housing units. That would be ideal. But it has proven to be unrealistic, given the hundreds of homeless people waiting for precious few beds. In the meantime, Council Member Alison Alter noted at a workshop this week, “where people and how people are camping right now does not seem particularly humane.”

The city’s new homeless strategy officer, Dianna Grey, noted sanctioned camps don’t provide the same level of services as traditional housing. But, she added, “nothing is off the table.”

At a minimum, sanctioned camp sites could provide access to restrooms and bathing facilities, improve connections with social service providers and ensure people are not living perilously close to traffic. Properly designed, such camps could even provide greater privacy and security for the people temporarily living there. The Other Ones Foundation, for instance, is working to bring 200 small shelters, manufactured by Pallet, to the state-owned homeless campsite in Montopolis, providing a glimpse of what’s possible. The Pallet structures, which run \$5,000 to \$7,000 apiece, have lockable doors, electrical connectivity, heating and A/C.

We recognize a parking lot filled with temporary tiny houses does not solve Austin’s homelessness crisis. But it could improve conditions in the short-term, while the city and a network of providers work on longer-term solutions. Indeed, the city must consider some kind of short-term options if the council proceeds with Council Member Ann Kitchen’s proposal to move people out of the city’s most hazardous roadside encampments.

The clamor for action by City Hall has grown louder in recent months, with thousands of Austinites seeking a referendum to bring back the camping ban, and Gov. Greg Abbott calling for a statewide ban. But Austin has already proven a city cannot eradicate homelessness through citations. The threat of tickets does not pull people into housing. It pushes them farther out of sight, farther away from the help they need.

Our city must show there is a better way to get people off the streets — not only months from now, but today. That starts with identifying a place where people who are homeless can safely wait for the help they need.