

Grumet: A homeless man lost everything in Austin's safe storage. But the city won't pay.



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These days all of Thom Woodward's belongings fit in an overstuffed black backpack. His sleeping bag, some clothes, a few personal items — that's all he has left.

Everything else is gone: The Jackson Dinky solid-body electric guitar he played for his solo act, Trig Ashes, a source of income. His laptop. Some tools. His birth certificate, Social Security card and personal papers. Plus an irreplaceable photo of his son.

All of it was taken from his locked bin at Violet KeepSafe Storage, the city-run facility that provides free, secure storage for people experiencing homelessness.

“I’m still in disbelief,” said Woodward, 51, who is temporarily homeless while searching for a new apartment. Looking for a way to describe the scale of his loss, Woodward added, “It’s like my house burned down.”

There is no dispute this incident was the city’s fault. Last month, a staffer at the storage facility cut the combination lock on Woodward’s bin and allowed someone else to take the items. The staffer mistakenly believed the other person owned Woodward’s bin, a city spokesperson said.

City officials say this is the first time such a mix-up has happened. They also believe a couple of changes — a new computer system already in the works and revised procedures for handling bins — will ensure it never happens again.

That’s good. But no one is making Woodward whole.

He is caught in a maddening loop where the police see no crime and the city accepts no responsibility. Woodward, like all Violet KeepSafe clients, signed a waiver up front absolving the city of any liability in case anything went wrong. A city claims investigator has refused to reimburse Woodward for any of his losses.



That's the part that strikes me: Austin taxpayers are spending tens of millions of dollars a year to help pull people out of homelessness, yet the city won't provide a penny of restitution after its mistake cost a homeless man everything, including the musical equipment that helps him earn some money.

The statements from city officials reflect a cool detachment from the plight of a person left empty-handed.

"We regret that he experienced a problem with the items he stored," a city spokesperson told me.

A vital resource

Hundreds of people experiencing homelessness rely on Violet KeepSafe Storage.

The facility is tucked into a squat parking garage next to the empty HealthSouth building at 12th and Red River streets, in the shadow of Waterloo Park. Murals of an astronaut and a whale, bespeckled by graffiti, adorn the

outer west wall. The north end offers the only entrance to the garage, wrapped in chain-link fencing that's locked at night.

The garage houses hundreds of wheeled, 96-gallon storage bins that look just like your curbside recycling cart, except these bins are purple and secured with locks.

This facility is a critical piece of Austin's homelessness response system. It provides a place for people to secure important items so they can go to the doctor, a job interview or work without leaving valuables unattended at their campsite.

Access to a free storage facility became even more essential to people experiencing homelessness after voters reinstated Austin's camping ban last May. When city crews clear out a homeless encampment, they provide purple bins for residents to salvage their belongings — clothing, bedding, documents, personal mementos. In the span of a year, the facility's clients have more than tripled from 132 to 440.

The Downtown Austin Community Court, which handles minor criminal cases and provides social services for people experiencing homelessness, runs the storage facility. It opened in 2020 as a no-frills enterprise: no security cameras, no specialty software. Just a \$148,000 payroll to cover the five temporary workers who track the information about clients' bins on Excel spreadsheets.

The problem with bin No. 227

City officials traced the mix-up over Woodward's bin to one of those spreadsheets.

The previous owner of bin No. 227 closed their account Jan. 10, making the cart available for someone else. But a staffer failed to delete the previous owner's information from the spreadsheet's "Full List of Clients," a city spokesperson said. Staff also failed to add Woodward to that list when bin No. 227 was reassigned to him Feb. 2.

Interestingly, that didn't prevent Woodward from accessing his bin for weeks. He knew his bin number and the combination on the lock. Staffers even logged his visits on a different "Daily Check-in Tracker" spreadsheet. Since everything seemed fine, no one bothered to check the client list — so no one realized Woodward wasn't properly recorded as the bin's owner.

Then the previous bin owner returned Feb. 20, asked for bin No. 227 and — no surprise — was unable to open the lock. After checking the client list spreadsheet, which incorrectly showed the bin assigned to the previous owner, the staffer cut the lock. The previous owner of the bin took off with the valuables "as if they were the owner of the items," the city spokesperson said.

When Woodward visited a couple of days later and discovered his items were gone, staffers pieced together what happened and tried to contact the previous owner of bin No. 227.

So far, no response.

Left without recourse

Woodward called Austin police to report his items stolen. After reviewing the matter, however, a detective concluded that "this is not considered theft due to (the fact) that Violet KeepSafe Storage gave him access to your property."

The detective agreed Woodward had been wronged: "Violet KeepSafe Storage ... is responsible for the safe keeping of your property and failed to do so." Police told Woodward, a man with no roof over his head and no money in his pocket, to file a lawsuit if he wants to seek justice.

Meanwhile, the city of Austin denied Woodward's claim for damages before staffers had *even finished* their internal review of the incident. Legally speaking, it didn't matter whose fault it was. Woodward had signed that waiver at the outset, holding the city harmless.

"Under state law, the City is immune from liability for losses such as this, and thus cannot use public funds to address Mr. Woodward's claim," a city spokesperson told me.

It's hard to believe a city as resourceful as Austin can't find a proper way to right this wrong. Yes, we should expect the city to be good stewards of our tax dollars. We also should expect the city to fix anything it breaks, especially when the damage is inflicted on someone who is already hurting.

As far as other consequences, the spokesperson told me the staffer who failed to update the spreadsheet "has received coaching and will receive additional training." The other staffer who cut the lock has quit.

A new policy prohibits old bins from being reassigned to new clients. City workers are also developing a new computer program to keep better track of the bins. Once that software launches, people accessing a bin will have to show

a photo ID or have their picture attached to their digital bin record, to help prevent future mix-ups.

Update

The people of Austin have done what city officials declined to do: Replace what Thom Woodward lost.

In the days after this column was published, several people offered Woodward a replacement guitar. He accepted one — a Jackson Dinky DK2 Crimson Red electric guitar — from John Bayreaux.

“I hope he knows that he matters and deserves to be treated decently,” Bayreaux told me.



Dozens more contributed to Woodward's GoFundMe account, which surpassed the \$3,500 goal he set to replace his belongings, including his laptop computer, other musical equipment and tools. Woodward told me he does not need any more donations at this time.

"The outpouring from the community has been amazing," he told me Monday afternoon, as he tried out his new guitar.

If you still feel moved to help, please consider donating to any of the organizations working with people experiencing homelessness in Austin. They do important work every day to help people who, one way or another, have lost everything.

Grumet is the Statesman's Metro columnist. Her column, ATX in Context, contains her opinions. Share yours via email at bgrumet@statesman.com or via Twitter at @bgrumet.