



Eugene Mennonite

People Practicing Peace

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To: The House Judiciary Committee, Oregon Legislature

My name is Steve Kimes, a Mennonite pastor. I have been assisting houseless people in Portland, Gresham and Eugene for the last 27 years. I have advocated for them and assisted them through sweeps in that time. These are but a few of the many acts of the systemic cruelty toward houseless people by police and city governments that I have witnessed.

-City sweeps and citations are usually “complaint driven”, or initiated by citizens who call the cities to complain about camps. I have had neighbors tell me that they called the police and lie to the authorities about what houseless people were doing while they were on my property. I know of citizens that drive throughout the city, looking for camps to complain about, even though they are not in the housed citizen’s neighborhood.

-The city of Portland has a phone line, an email and a website for people to report homeless camps. City resources are used so frequently against people not participating in criminal activity. In Portland, the city hires a clean up company to join them in regular sweeps of all the homeless camps.

-I have seen disabled people cited and fined for not being able to move in the time required without any accommodation provided by the City government.

-I have seen city workers in both Portland and Eugene seize and throw away survival gear and significant possessions because it was “wet” or “likely to mold” in storage. In Eugene, the sweeps have begun to use bulldozers which dump whole tents into dumpsters, which does not allow workers to sort through what would be important to keep and what would not.

-I have spoken to city workers in Portland, who admitted that for about a year they stored houseless people’s seized possessions in Tigard, an hour and a half bus ride away from Portland. A houseless person called the retrieval number the workers gave us, we were told we couldn’t speak to the department we were seeking, but they would call us back. They never called us back. The city of Portland has a habit of seizing and then not providing a fair means of returning possessions, in accord with Oregon State Law.

-I have helped houseless people try to find another location and move in the middle of icy rain, some of whom were disabled.

-I have provided hotel accommodations for people who were forced to move despite being ill during this pandemic. The city of Eugene provided no accommodation.

-I have seen camps of 12-20 people forced to move because of the criminal activity of one of the people in the camp. Yet we do not force apartment buildings to vacate because one in that building is a thief.

-I have seen houseless people blamed for activity (e.g. dumping garbage) that they did not do and so were forced to move and/or cited.

-I have seen vehicles cited for being in “storage” and threatened to be towed for “abandonment” when the officer citing the vehicle knows that it is not abandoned or stored, but in fact occupied by the owners.

-I have seen these owners work for days to get a tow from a friend or acquaintance, have the vehicle moved to legal parking, and then cited again in two weeks by the same officer who cited them the first time.

-I have seen a disabled person, forced to move away from the area she was staying in, weep for hours because she believed that she would never see her boyfriend again because he was in jail.

-I have seen police hold, cuff, threaten to arrest houseless people on my private property, although the houseless people were granted permission to be on my property and were involved in no criminal act. Then I was screamed at by an officer for allowing them on my property.

-I have seen houseless people abandon their property and flee because police officers showed up at a sweep, as a response to trauma they have experienced with police officers in the past.

-I have had discussions with a houseless friend of mine, Eugenia, who was a disabled woman with a walker in Gresham, and she was a month away from housing through a local agency. She had an agreement with a Gresham barber to stay behind his shop nightly. A local officer found her there and threatened to arrest her if he found her anywhere in the city for the next thirty days. He cited her for trespassing. All of the services she relied on were in the city, but she was frightened that if she were arrested that her little dogs that she kept on her walker with her would be taken. So she took the train out of the city every night (during that officer's shift) and back during the day. When she came to our church for rest and a meal, she looked sick, exhausted and pale. We asked if we could take her to a hospital, but she refused. She walked about a quarter mile away from our church and she died that night in the parking lot of a Salvation Army.

-I have interviewed police officers who say they are not social workers and they don't want the job of sweeping the homeless.

It is agreed upon by the police, by homeless advocates and by experts that arrests, citing and sweeping houseless individuals does nothing to address the underlying issues of homelessness in Oregon's towns and cities. Housed neighbors think they are contacting the police and camp reporting lines for a solution, but there is no solution being offered. Instead, the response is criminalization of houseless people, which only serves to perpetuate cycles of homelessness.

It is past time for House Bill 2367, the Right to Rest act. It is time for us, as communities, to stop relying on police work, which only serves to punish the poorest of our neighbors, and so to discover real solutions.

Pastor Steve Kimes
Eugene Mennonite Church