

D.C.

Expedited clearing of McPherson Square leaves D.C., homeless scrambling

Few residents of the downtown park have been approved for city housing assistance ahead of a new Feb. 15 deadline

By [Marissa J. Lang](#) and [Kyle Swenson](#)

February 2, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EST

The day after residents of the District's largest homeless encampment learned they would be cleared out of McPherson Square two months sooner than expected, D.C. outreach workers and officials Wednesday were hustling to avoid leaving dozens of unhoused residents out in the cold with nowhere to go.

Of the estimated 70 people packed into the park, just 15 had been approved to receive housing assistance from the District as of Wednesday morning, according to Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services Wayne Turnage. Ten more were awaiting approval, Turnage said, while the rest had "simply refused to engage with our team."

But residents of the McPherson park, located at the core of the District's downtown government and financial sector, said the city's efforts over the winter months had come at a trickle — until now.

On Wednesday, about a dozen outreach workers wove through the encampment, scribbling down residents' information on clipboards and walking individuals through the steps needed to apply for housing assistance before the new Feb. 15 deadline. A city-owned, 32-seat bus sat parkside, ready for caseworkers to use as a makeshift office space. Some residents seemed to listen; others kept their distance.

For some experiencing homelessness, previous attempts to get help have left them with little trust in the system. "You're not going to help us all," one woman repeatedly yelled at caseworkers Wednesday afternoon, before going inside her tent.

Amid the commotion, Shelley Byars, 45, stepped out from her own tent on the park's southern corner. She pulled on thick gloves against the cold wind.

"I've been here since June 2022," she said, pointing at the items — tarps, a bike, a wheeled cart piled with bags — bundled around the tent where she slept.

Byars said she lived in Oxon Run Park, in Southeast Washington, before migrating to McPherson. Although she knew officials were planning to clear the downtown encampment, she said she had little idea how or when the removal would happen. Notices announcing the new date were posted around the park Monday, but residents kept ripping them down.

"How are we supposed to move all our stuff?" Byars said. "We're not camping. We live here."

The McPherson Square encampment, which has grown over the past six months, had been scheduled to be cleared April 12, once hypothermia season in D.C. was declared over. But Turnage had asked the National Park Service, which oversees the park grounds, to move up its timeline because of "high levels of illegal drug and other criminal activity" that "impedes social services' outreach and endangers social services providers, mental health clinicians, unsheltered individuals and the public," according to a letter obtained by The Washington Post.

In an interview, neither Turnage nor Jamal Weldon, who oversees the District's response to homeless encampments for Turnage's department, said they could cite specific examples of encampment residents endangering service providers or clinicians. But Weldon said that he had received reports from outreach staff of "hostile engagements" in the park and that U.S. Park Police also had observed "safety issues" during their routine patrols of the area.

Jesse Rabinowitz, the senior manager for policy and advocacy at the homeless outreach organization Miriam's Kitchen, said a rushed approach to removing unhoused residents from McPherson fails to address the problems officials have cited at the site, such as property crime, drug use and unsanitary conditions.

"We're not actually solving the root of any of these problems; we're just forcing them to move elsewhere," Rabinowitz said. "Why are evictions of encampments the only solution we ever use?"

Several people living at McPherson Square moved there only after being pushed out of other encampments. Daniel Kingery, who has lived in the park since April 2020, said he could track D.C. encampment closures by when the population in McPherson swelled. The first big wave came in June 2020, Kingery said, when D.C. officials closed Franklin Square for renovations — and displaced the homeless residents who sought shelter there. With each encampment sweep — in NoMa, on New Jersey Avenue, outside Union Square — more people would trudge into McPherson Square and set up camp.

Kingery, who said he is a former Marine, began living in McPherson after he was booted from nearby Lafayette Square, where he had protested the government day and night until April 2020, when U.S. Secret Service ordered him to evacuate. He refused, was arrested and was issued a stay-away order.

“People think about McPherson as the encampment of last resort,” Rabinowitz said. “There are people who live there for whom this will be their fourth or fifth eviction. People are getting tossed around the city, pushed from one place to another, and it’s indicative of what we have been saying for years now, which is that closing encampments does not solve homelessness.”

Turnage acknowledged that encampment closures lead to displacements.

“We try to avoid that as best we can by offering a range of services,” he said, noting that D.C. has several shelters for homeless adults and will put voucher recipients up in a hotel while they await a housing placement. “That doesn’t change the fact that some [encampment residents] will simply move.”

Turnage said the District would spend the next two weeks making an “expedited effort” to convince 50 or so residents to accept government assistance, seek shelter in one of the city’s low-barrier facilities or otherwise leave the area before Feb. 15.

Kingery, 61, who resides under a large beach umbrella at the southwest corner of the park, said government outreach and police intervention had been minimal at the encampment before this week, even when residents themselves had asked for help. He derided Wednesday’s visibly ramped-up effort as “one big show.”

“This is all to make it look like they’re doing something when they’re just shuffling people from one park to the other,” Kingery said.

On Wednesday, Byars said, an outreach worker had stopped by her tent offering information about her options. But Byars was distrustful. She said that the city approved her for a housing voucher in July but that no one had helped find a place to stay.

Turnage blamed the backlog of housing vouchers and services on a persistent caseworker shortage that has hampered the city’s ability to put a meaningful dent in its homelessness crisis.

“There are enough vouchers to basically eliminate homelessness in this city,” Turnage said. “The problem is you have to have the units available to absorb those vouchers and the case managers who are available to work with these residents, particularly those who have challenges, to make sure they get the wraparound services they need so that the placements don’t collapse into failure.”

For the unhoused residents of McPherson Square, the sight of more government workers Wednesday did little to lift their hopes.

Kingery — whose ongoing protest requires him to be in proximity to the White House — said he is not sure what he’ll do if the park is forcibly closed in two weeks. He can’t go back to Lafayette Square, he said. Franklin Square, a block from McPherson, has been deemed a no-camping zone. As the District shuts down more sites, the options dwindle.