

Calls to halt District program meant to move homeless out of tents into housing intensify

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On Monday, just hours after city workers packed up and left a Northeast Washington homeless encampment after scooping up a sleeping man still inside his tent, Deputy Mayor Wayne Turnage assessed the job the District did there as part of a pilot program as “quite successful.”

More than 20 individuals who had been living in the tents under the Metro overpass on L Street and M Street NE had been placed in hotel rooms or set up with year-long apartment leases. However, after a man was picked up by a front-loader in the midst of the mass clear-outs of the encampment and taken to the hospital, community members and homeless advocates, as well as several District officials said they had seen enough.

In the days since, calls have intensified for the D.C. Department of Human Services (DHS) to halt its [pilot program](#) meant to permanently empty some of the city’s largest homeless encampments using a “housing first” model. Critics have called the program rushed, unsafe and incomplete.

The man who was lifted up out of his tent on L Street NE did not suffer any serious injuries and was later released from the hospital that same day, according to District officials, but community groups, homeless advocates and several D.C. Council members have held up the incident as evidence that if mismanaged the pilot program could result in [serious injury](#) or worse for the most vulnerable residents it seeks to help out.

An [open letter](#) calling for an end to the encampment evictions has, as of Thursday, amassed more than 800 signatures from residents, advocates and elected members of the Advisory Neighborhood Commission.

“This is much the wrong approach, and if there was any question that this was the wrong approach, a man was almost thrown out with his tent on Monday,” said council member Robert C. White Jr. (D-At Large), who on Wednesday called for the pilot program to stop until [further work](#) on the initiative was done. “I don’t see why we would prioritize rushing this as opposed to prioritizing people getting into housing and the services that they need in a deliberate way,” he said, adding, “Give this more time.”

DHS officials say they have no intention of stopping or slowing the efforts. Outreach is underway at two more encampments scheduled to be cleared, on E Street near 20th Street NW and at a park on New Jersey Avenue and O Street NW, and DHS officials said they will proceed as scheduled. As of Wednesday, 27 people from the NoMa encampment had been moved to apartments or placed in hotels to wait for permanent housing, DHS said. Over half a dozen homeless individuals remained at the underpass.

In an emailed statement Thursday, DHS officials said the encampment team has, in the wake of the incident Monday, compiled a list of new steps that workers will follow before making any attempt to remove a tent or other structure in future clear-outs: Provide residents “final reminders” before the sweep begins, establish a hard perimeter around the

future clear-outs. Provide residents final reminders before the sweep begins, establish a hard perimeter around the entire encampment that will be delineated by traffic cones or caution tape and controlled by police, and open each tent completely as cleanup crews remove any waste or hazardous material, rather than scooping up a tent and whatever might remain inside of it for disposal by the city.

Council member Charles Allen (D-Ward 6), who chairs the public safety committee, said he would like to see DHS officials go several steps further to ensure that no residents are in harm's way when city workers begin to clear a space, including eliminating the use of construction vehicles to remove the structures that "probably went up by hand."

"Why you need to bring heavy machinery to remove a tent just doesn't make sense," Allen said. "Starting the process with a bulldozer is not just recognizing people's humanity." He did not say the encampments should remain or that the pilot should end. He noted that winter is coming and people sleeping in tents outside remain at particular risk.

To put more pressure on the D.C. Council to rein in the pilot, outreach workers and homeless advocates have begun a phone drive to elected leaders, including Allen, to demand that DHS stop trying to clear the encampments until after all homeless residents who reside in the target areas have been placed into safe and permanent housing.

Just over 100 homeless residents who were present and living at those selected encampments by Aug. 23 were eligible to be placed on a list that officials are using to assign housing, according to Turnage. That means several individuals who began camping at the sites after the program had begun are not in the same pipeline for permanent homes.

Early Tuesday, as trash compactors and power washers lined up in NoMa to continue clearing the encampment there, a man named Ricky Thomas, 45, stepped out of a double-parked sedan to survey the scene. He has been living in his car for more than a year. Earlier this week, he had heard that people on L Street and M Street were getting apartments. "I could bring my tent out right now if that's what it takes," Thomas said.

Reginald Black, the advocacy director for the People's Fairness Coalition, said the group has been keeping track of individuals who have moved into the encampments since the program began late August. Many believe they will be included and are largely unaware that the deadline has passed.

"If they're only prioritizing certain people who are living outside, then they need to say that and be very clear. What I

worry about is that you're going to have a lot of people vacating shelter or other situations to move outside and try to improve their chances of accessing services sooner," he said.

Ann Marie Staudenmaier, a staff attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, said D.C. is creating a false tension between people on the program list and those living in shelters or other circumstances who might have been waiting to receive services. "With the unprecedented amount of money which is available right now, both federal money and District money, every single person could be offered housing," she said.

