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## Ellen Allen: Life is complex; this won't be our last tent city

By Ellen Allen



Things are seldom as simple as they seem. The [dismantling of tent city by Mayoral edict](#) on Tuesday evoked a visceral reaction reverberating throughout our community. I have spent countless hours the last two days talking with friends about the appropriateness of these actions.

The truth is homelessness and outdoor encampments pose a health risk to those immediate residents of their adopted community as well as throughout the community at large. We have some experience with this at Covenant House.

Only this summer a small encampment of 8 to 12 people established their home on the parking lot of the Prestera Center next door to Covenant House and Roark Sullivan Lifeway Center — the city funded men's shelter. One may find this ironic.

During this time, we received a citation from the health department for allowing unsanitary conditions to thrive. Phil Hainen of our staff actually spent parts of his days shoveling and removing human feces from and around our property; this despite the fact that approximately 150 beds exist within steps of our building.

Using our campus as an outdoor bathroom continued during the hours we were open even though bathroom, shower and laundry facilities are free and open 40 hours per week. Violent and aggressive behaviors increased. This is not a judgment; it is an observation.

At the same time, shelters can be dangerous places; many choose to remain outside. While we must respect one's right to self-determination, we must consider the larger implications of belonging in community with one another.

Many studies show that women living in such encampments are victims of sexual assault and other violence. This holds true for people with disabilities, both physical and developmentally as well. While shelters may not be one's first choice for temporary emergency housing, they can provide a framework of safety and support of social services and even health care.

Social media is replete with questions of "What can I do to help?"

My first response is to take time to understand the complexities of what is really happening.

The Mayor did not consult with me before dismantling tent city. I can speak to my experience with the city this summer when we were faced with people living on top of our campus.

We found a city administration that was compassionate and one that was clear they did not intend to criminalize people experiencing homelessness. They also had a resolve to address public health and safety issues.

What if our community was instead talking today about the person who froze to death on the bank of the Elk River while we dropped off firewood, coffee and the occasional blanket? This image is drastically harsher than watching belongings being packed in clear storage bins.

The truth is, Charleston, West Virginia is home to extraordinary services for people experiencing homelessness or living in poverty. Among city funded shelters of YWCA Sojourner's, Roark Sullivan Lifeway Center and faith-based shelters, ample beds exist in our city that no one should be forced to sleep outside. Other mechanisms are in place, too. Manna Meal prepares two complete and nutritious meals a day, 365 days per year. The local faith community provides a dinner meal on most of the days of the week. No one should go hungry.

The greater issue is the need for systemic change. Intergenerational poverty and long-term untreated trauma expose a disproportionate number of West Virginians to homelessness.

Over 100,000 West Virginia children live in poverty today. We must not get discouraged. We must look deeply within ourselves. We have not seen our last tent city, and will not until long-term systemic change becomes rooted in our politics and budgets.

In the meantime, the advocates of our compassionate and caring community will step up.

Ellen Allen is executive director of Covenant House.