



## **Joint City-County Statement on Unhoused Residents**

**June 1, 2021**

The City of Missoula and Missoula County, working collaboratively, have deemed the current number of residents who are unhoused -and the effects of that homelessness on those individuals without permanent, safe housing and the consequences of homelessness to the larger community constitute as a critical issue demanding extraordinary attention.

In order to mobilize collective resources to mitigate human suffering and environmental degradation, enhance public safety and ensure that facilities owned by the public are available for intended uses, we will deploy an incident-management team skilled in solving complex problems.

Our mission is three-fold:

- Create safe spaces in the short-term for unhoused residents to be safely housed, to safely camp outdoors or in vehicles
- End illegal camping in the urban wild
- Create safe, simple, indoor housing that can serve residents until they can find permanent housing that matches their needs and resources

Both the City of Missoula and Missoula County have been responding to resident concerns on all sides of this crisis, including advocates who believe we should open parks and streets to unlimited camping as well as advocates who want us to run unhoused people out of the community. We believe that neither of those extremes serve our community's best interests.

Fundamentally, this is an issue of public health and safety. Illegal camping in public spaces threatens the environmental health of the community, our rivers and public lands, all resources the community has spent years and public dollars restoring. Further, these illegal urban camps pose a health and safety threat to campers and the general public.

We recognize that the plight of our unhoused residents is an experience that few of us can actually imagine, so we need to rely on the expertise of professionals who understand the experiences of unhoused Missoulians in finding ways to solve their fundamental challenge by leading them to safe, permanent housing. Further, we recognize that unhoused residents are in their position for a variety of complex reasons and that being unhoused is not a character flaw or a moral failure but a product of poverty, mental illness, trauma, substance use disorder and more, often in combination. We also know, based on estimates from experts, that the challenge of homelessness is only growing throughout the United States.

We also recognize that the majority of residents in Missoula County have homes and expect to be able to enjoy their neighborhoods, businesses and public amenities without fear of encountering unsafe conditions.

And we recognize that we have an obligation to serve all of our residents and to strike a balance

in our approach to solving the challenge of homelessness in our community. We know that we are not alone in trying to find that balance and that most desirable communities in the United States are trying to sort out this complex, tragic dilemma, which has only been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is also important to note why we are engaging in a new level of enforcement: City and County staff, charged with maintaining these open spaces for public enjoyment, encounter threats, clean up extraordinary amounts of trash and are exposed to human waste and used drug paraphernalia, particularly hypodermic needles. These spaces were never intended to be campgrounds and they aren't safe or sanitary for campers, staff or the general public. We don't believe it is appropriate to simply cede these lands to illegal camping. Further, City and County officials have been hearing from residents for some time now that some (and we emphasize "some") campers are engaging in behavior that makes residents feel unsafe and unwilling to use public lands they, in part, own.

The City of Missoula and Missoula County, working with our public and private, not-for-profit partners, have created this plan to supplement Reaching Home, our 10-year plan to end homelessness, to address issues that have captured the general public's attention, namely illegal camping in the city and county.

There is no single, simple solution to ending homelessness in our community, as we've learned through our effective work implementing Reaching Home, but we agree that we need to take some new, intentional steps to temper the escalation in community concern and fear and to ensure the safety of unhoused residents.

Staff and officers from the City of Missoula's Parks & Recreation Department and Police Department have exercised persistent patience throughout the past month as illegal camping expanded following the closure of emergency winter shelter. Parks staff and officers visited with campers on the West Broadway islands to let them know that camping is not allowed by City ordinance and that they would need to move on. Police and Parks staff assisted campers with food, money and resources to make vacating the islands easier. There was one violent episode involving an individual wielding a knife and threatening an officer, and that individual was arrested. Otherwise, interactions were as calm, humane and collaborative as they could be.

Again, this plan comes in three parts to address short-, long- and medium-term goals.

First, we will work together to identify appropriate land for supervised, sanctioned camping based on Missoula County's Temporary Safe Outdoor Space shelter program, which has been successful in providing a safe place for unhoused residents who can't access other shelter because of capacity challenges in our existing shelter system. We will also work with our providers and partners, including the Poverello Center, United Way of Missoula County, Hope Rescue Mission and the Salvation Army, in helping them return to pre-pandemic occupancy capacity, which will temper the need for outdoor camping. We'll also work with other partners who are able to provide temporary indoor shelter to increase their capacity. As necessary, the City and County will partner to purchase space for this use.

Second, because there are safety and environmental concerns under the Reserve Street bridge, we will find new housing options for residents, help them move if they wish to take us up on these new options, and then close the area. We take these actions to both repair the environmental degradation to the space and restore a level of human dignity for the residents. The Montana Department of Transportation owns the land under the Reserve Street bridge and will no longer

tolerate the danger to their infrastructure. We will no longer tolerate the damage to the river and the surrounding environment. We also recognize that life in the urban wild puts people at near continual risk and dramatically limits their potential. We will offer residents safe and secure shelter, with enough services to help them move forward, assist with transporting their belongings, and then formally close the area. We will enforce closure through warning and, if necessary, citations for trespassing.

Third, the solution to helping people without housing is to house them, for the long term, in a safe, supported environment. One such facility is close to breaking ground, the Trinity Apartments, but we will need to be intentional in creating more supportive housing through partnerships like the one we've established with the Missoula Housing Authority to build Trinity. All of this will be expensive, but there is tremendous cost, both social and financial, to supporting folks living on the street and in the urban wild that far outweighs investment in supportive, permanent housing.

The City and County will manage this plan through our Office of Emergency Management and establish an interdisciplinary team that will include social workers and experts in behavioral health, as well as leaders in housing, land management, finance and public safety and emergency management.

It bears repeating two truths:

First, Homelessness is hard and takes time and will never completely end, but we can take positive, thoughtful, intentional steps that ease human suffering, cycles of poverty, violence and trauma while making all residents feel safer and able to enjoy public spaces.

Second, Missoula is not alone in this and suggestions to the contrary are self-serving and not based in fact. We provide services because they are needed, and the community would suffer greatly without them. We do not provide services to create a need.

We'll ask patience from all residents we serve and some degree of civility and reasonableness as we move forward. We live in an age of hot rhetoric that foments discord when we need thoughtful suggestions on how we move forward together, striking a balance that comes closer to serving more interests. This plan is designed to do just that.

We will no longer accept illegal camping in the urban wild; we will offer safe, secure, sanitary shelter with enough services to help people move forward. We will never allow ourselves to look like the major metro areas of the Northwest.