

Portland ends pilot 'safe sleeping' policy immediately

Associated Press, by Gillian Flaccus, August 2, 2016

PORLAND, Ore. (AP) — Portland Mayor Charlie Hales on Tuesday announced the end of pilot program that allowed homeless people to sleep on the streets undisturbed by law enforcement, saying it created confusion because some believed it legalized public camping, but defended his overall approach.

The so-called "Safe Sleeping Guidelines" policy will end immediately, but several other pilot programs that also were rolled out in February in the famously liberal City of Roses will continue or even expand, the mayor said in a phone interview with The Associated Press.

"The 'safe sleep' policy was well intended, but it created a lot of confusion and maybe some accidental or deliberate misunderstandings," Hales said. "It was never intended to legalize (street) camping."

Hales has walked a fine line in trying to address a growing problem with homelessness in the Pacific Northwest city while appeasing homeowners and businesses. His struggles mirror those in other West Coast cities, such as Seattle and San Francisco, where politicians have grappled to address a tide of homelessness.

Portland's safe sleeping policy allowed homeless people to unroll a sleeping bag or unfurl a tarp between 9 p.m. and 7 a.m. on city sidewalks and allowed camping in some specific areas of the city -- but never in more than groups of six.

When Hales announced it in February, it drew immediate criticism.

Neighborhood and business groups, including the Portland Business Alliance, sued.

The Willamette Week, the city's alternative weekly, sent a team of reporters to test the policy by pitching tents on the sidewalk in front of Hales' home and the homes of other elected officials.

The policy was supposed to be a temporary measure while the city worked to create more temporary housing and dovetailed with the city's declaration of a state of emergency for homelessness. Portland has about 1,800 homeless people and needs 1,000 shelter beds, Hales said.

A coalition opposing the policy, Safe & Livable Portland, called the mayor's move a step in the right direction and added they wouldn't seek further legal action against the city.

"Mayor Hales' policy failed, in part, because he ignored the voices of the affected Portland residents, neighborhood communities and businesses," the coalition said in a statement. "We look forward to a renewed focus from the City to include the community in finding effective ways to offer safe, long-term housing and support for those experiencing homelessness."

But rolling back the safe sleeping policy was not a sign of failure, Hales said. The city has created 450 new shelter beds, expanded its emergency housing capacity and earmarked \$250 million for affordable housing, he added.

"In the big picture, we're taking actions that are unprecedented. This administration and the city council are doing more on the issue of homelessness than has ever been done before — and we're actually making a difference," Hales told the AP.

"We know this problem will not be solved overnight."

While the safe sleep policy is ending, the city still hopes to create planned outdoor shelters on publicly owned land that can be managed by nonprofit groups. The city would provide basic services such as water and trash, as well as social services.

Hales late last week also postponed for a month a sweep of a massive, illegal homeless encampment along the Springwater Corridor that had been set for Monday after homeless advocates said they needed more time to find other housing for the most at-risk residents.

Police will still practice compassionate enforcement of street sleeping, "recognizing that the city doesn't have enough shelter beds for everyone and some people have to sleep outside," according to a statement from the mayor's office.

Several other pilot programs will stay in effect, including city-serviced portable toilets and garbage disposals for the homeless, street outreach and a mobile phone app and hotline that residents can use to report livability issues to the city.

The city will expand a pilot program that provides day storage for homeless people who have job interviews and medical appointments.