

Huntington homeless advocacy group facing eviction gets more time

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A homeless advocacy group in Huntington Beach that is facing eviction from its current location because the city believes its presence has attracted homeless people to Central Park got some additional time during a meeting with city officials Wednesday morning.

About 70 people flocked to City Hall to show support for Beach Cities Interfaith Services, which has worked out of four mobile units at 18131 Gothard St. for about three years. The organization received an eviction notice from the city last week, sparking outrage among supporters who feel the group provides necessary services to local homeless people and those who are at risk of becoming homeless.

But the city contends it has experienced an increase in public safety issues in Central Park stemming from homeless people who seek services from BCIS.

BCIS executive director Karen Maurer attended a meeting Wednesday with city officials as many of her backers wore red as a signal to the city to stop the eviction process.

As she walked into City Hall, the group chanted "BCIS."

After the meeting, Maurer said her organization will have six months in addition to the original 60 days in the eviction notice to vacate the property. She said BCIS asked that the eviction be overturned but that city officials contended its presence has attracted homeless people to Central Park.

City Manager Fred Wilson said in an email Wednesday afternoon that homeless people are involved in a variety of unlawful activities at the park and the nearby sports complex, including vandalizing bathrooms and using them for drug use.

He said staff members at the park's public library have been assaulted by homeless people and, in one case, threatened with a knife.

Wilson said police have contacted homeless people in the park and been told they are in the area for BCIS services.

Mayor Barbara Delgleize, who sat in on the meeting, said the city will work with BCIS to find another location.

But Mark Currie, president of the Greater Huntington Beach Interfaith Council, said BCIS provides housing assistance, food, counseling and bus passes for the homeless.

"If you evict them, then where do the homeless go?" he said.

Ralph Bauer, a former City Council member who served as mayor in 1997, said the eviction is part of the city's "strategy to criminalize homelessness."

And Maurer said her group is being "scapegoated" for a homeless problem that is already spread across many communities.

She believes Central Park would be a prime gathering spot for the homeless anyway, with dense foliage providing cover and amenities like free wireless Internet connection available at the library.

BCIS has been blamed for worsening the homeless situation before. In 2013, the City Council voted to evict the group from its location at the time, the library at 525 Main St., with some claiming the organization attracted homeless people to the downtown area.

Maurer said there is still a homeless problem downtown, though BCIS hasn't been there for years.

The organization will have another meeting with the city in 90 days, Maurer said.

"We want to work with the city; we don't want to be antagonistic," she said.

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