

Cities in San Diego County increasingly target the homeless, and those helping feed them

The Los Angeles Times, by Gary Warth, Jan 22, 2018, 8:35 a.m.

Citations for feeding people in parks. Arrests for sleeping in public. Jagged landscaping that makes it impossible for anyone to find a place to rest.

These are just some of the steps cities in San Diego County and elsewhere have taken against homeless people.

The actions are commonly condemned by homeless advocates who see them as criminalizing homelessness. But they also demonstrate how cities face the challenge of protecting property owners while also helping their most vulnerable citizens.

Most recently, El Cajon had a public relations nightmare when about a dozen people were arrested Jan. 14, on the eve of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, for violating a city ordinance against feeding people at Wells Park.

"Right now, a lot of people are screaming about how we hate the homeless, and I patently disagree," said El Cajon Mayor Bill Wells.

While the arrests were condemned by the American Civil Liberties Union of San Diego and Imperial Counties, Wells was not dissuaded.

"If this comes back to me again, I'd do the same thing," he said. "It's the right thing to do."

Wells said the city was not trying to keep food away from hungry people — there are numerous places in El Cajon that provide free food to the needy — but was trying to protect them from a hepatitis A outbreak that was killing homeless people.

This was far from the first controversy involving a San Diego County city's efforts to enforce laws about homelessness.

San Diego has been sued at least three times for laws targeting the homeless, with one suit still pending.

In Oceanside last year, the city considered but did not adopt a law that would have prohibited anyone from sitting or lying on a downtown public sidewalk during business hours.

Paul Boden, executive director of the Western Regional Advocacy Project in San Francisco, said the proposed law was similar to ones many cities try to enact, with varying degrees of success.

"They're actually very consistent," he said about laws that cities adopt. "These laws, like no feeding, they travel from city to city."

The research and coordinating group works with organizations in California, Colorado and Oregon, and Boden said interviews with 1,600 homeless people found the three top criminal offenses they've faced were sleeping, sitting and standing still.

Working with the UC Berkeley School of Law in 2015, the organization researched 82 California cities, including San Diego, and found 820 different laws and more than 1,000 municipal codes having to do with food sharing, camping, sitting, standing still and other actions. There were 106 different laws just about sleeping in cars, he said.

San Diego had five laws against standing, sitting or resting, four against sleeping, camping and lodging and five against begging and panhandling.

Oceanside had 15 laws and 19 restrictions about homeless, more than any other city in San Diego County on the list, which also included Carlsbad, Chula Vista and Escondido.