

Oakland opens first ‘safe haven’ sanctioned homeless encampment

The Mercury News, by Ali Tadayan, Bay Area News Group, December 4, 2017, 6:56 pm



City is building modular structures for its first sanctioned homeless encampment on 6th and Brush on 12-04-17, Oakland, California. Photo by Paul Kuroda

OAKLAND — Oakland opened the gates to its first “safe haven” city-sanctioned and operated homeless encampment Monday.

The encampment occupies what was an empty lot between Sixth and Brush streets and Seventh and Castro streets. It features 20 modular units similar to “Tuff Sheds,” designed to house 40 people for up to six months at a time. The encampment will offer a variety of services aimed at getting homeless people into more permanent housing situations.

City officials have been working for months to get the program up and running as part of a broader effort to reduce Oakland’s unsheltered homeless population.

“We’re very excited that we are starting to put up this Tuff Shed shelter, but let’s be clear, this is not a permanent solution; this is a right-now intervention,” said Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf at a news conference.

The sheds house two people each, and two additional sheds are used to store the occupants’ things, said Oakland Assistant City Administrator Joe DeVries. A site manager and a case manager both have offices at the site, and security guards patrol at night.

Portable toilets and hand-washing stations are set up at the encampment; the city has contracted with the nonprofit Lava Mae, of San Francisco, to bring mobile shower facilities to the site once a week.

Electricity isn't available in the sheds, DeVries said, but the site manager's and case manager's offices will have electricity if occupants need to charge their cellphones or other things, he said.

A dog run also has been set up.

The land is being paid for by Pacific Gas and Electric Company, which had originally rented the lot from a private owner to stage equipment. PG&E decided to let the city use the land instead, and will eat the cost, DeVries said.

The sheds were purchased with donations from the Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Sutter Health; the Oakland Builders Alliance donated materials and labor.

"Oaklanders showed up the way Oaklanders do: with compassion," Schaaf said.

Between money from the city's budget and outside donations, the site has about \$550,000 to work with. That will pay for the wrap-around services, security and the other service offered.

Safe Haven residents are expected to follow the site's rules, such as not have weapons, not do drugs in the open and not be violent. The residents will receive reports every 30 days on their progress finding stable housing.

If they don't follow the rules, DeVries said, they could be expelled.

"We have to assume as much good as we can; these are people who need shelter, and they're in tough shape," DeVries said. "We have to treat each one individually and offer them all wrap-around services."

Residents are able to leave and come back when they please as well as have guests, though guests aren't allowed to stay overnight.

In addition to the case manager, a "housing navigator" will also be working full time to find the safe haven residents permanent housing.

A small group of homeless people who live near the site told the Oakland Tribune that they didn't want to live there because it seemed too restrained. Damon "Pops" Scarbrough said he would have preferred if the city would just allow homeless people to set up their own encampment on the land.

"It's a good idea; it's just too controlling," Scarbrough said.

Jared Jaxson, who is homeless and lives on Sixth Street, said many of the homeless in the area are addicted to drugs and would fear living in a monitored environment.

"People are trying to get their life together, but if you give them boundaries and rules, that's like jail. Most of the people out here have been institutionalized. This is nothing but another institution," he said.

DeVries said the city anticipates drug addicts moving in and does not expect people to stay sober.

"There will be some rules; people can't just do whatever they want," DeVries said. "On the other side of the coin, there will be safety and security, which they currently don't have living on the street. It's a choice they have to make."

Operation Dignity, the nonprofit contracted by the city to provide outreach to homeless people, has been talking to those who live on the street near the site to inform them of the site. Operation Dignity workers reported to DeVries that more than 80 percent of the nearby homeless people were interested in moving in.

Nearby residents and business owners are also excited about the site, he said.

“By creating this and having it well monitored, we will also have a no-camping zone and will be getting rid of all the rats and garbage and things that have come with it,” DeVries said.

Oakland aims to clear the encampments near the site by the end of the year, DeVries said.

The site at Sixth and Brush is a pilot, DeVries said. The city hopes to open more sites one at a time. The next one will be housed on a city-owned lot near Martin Luther King Jr. Way and MacArthur Boulevard, Schaaf said. Oakland does not have a deadline set for that site.

“Every little thing we do is helping to mediate the immediate problem while we work on the long-term solution, which is permanent supportive housing,” Schaaf said.

Ali Tadayon is an award-winning journalist covering Oakland for the Bay Area News Group. He joined the team in 2017 after working as a crime reporter in Riverside and Idaho Falls, Idaho.