

Homeless tent city in the heart of gentrifying Washington gets moved out

The Washington Post, by Ian Shapira, June 20, 7:33 p.m.

They had what they needed, what they preferred.

The homeless men and women living in tents beneath a rail bridge by the NoMa-Gallaudet University Metro station — in the heart of gentrifying Washington, D.C. — slept under the shade. They didn't worry about the rain. And they could live in relative privacy.

On Tuesday, though, their time was up. D.C. police officers and crews from the Department of Public Works rolled up to L, K, and M Streets NE, at the intersection of 2nd Street NE, to clean up the spacious sidewalks where a large number of homeless men and women had pitched tents for several weeks or months. The cleanup crews weren't a surprise: earlier this month, the city had put up signs warning that they would be coming at 10 a.m. Tuesday, June 20. Sure enough, they came right on schedule.

The city said the encampments violated a ban on camping in public places without approval.

Many of the homeless abandoned their tent city Monday night — some moving just around the corner or a few blocks away — but some stayed for Tuesday's peaceful removal. The backdrop encapsulated everything about Washington's changes: Right across the street from the removal of homeless people, large construction cranes loomed over luxury apartments-in-progress, with signs bearing the corporate real estate logos of Tishman and Toll Brothers. Lining one side of the block: fitness boxing and barre studios. On the other side: a spin studio, a gourmet coffee shop, and, an R.E.I. store selling, of all things, expensive tents.

Homelessness in D.C. is declining — it's dropped 11 percent since last year to about 7,500 — but still remains higher than it was in 2015.

"[The city] looks at us like eyesores, and we're not," said Kittie Kagoma Johnson, 38, who had been living along the NoMa streets cleaned up by the city until she was forced out.

What about one of the city's homeless shelters?

"Too infested. Bed bugs," she said. "The food they give us is spoiled and outdated."

In a news conference across the street from the cleanup, Kristy Greenwalt, director of the D.C. Interagency Council on Homelessness, stressed that every homeless person in the District has immediate access to a shelter. But as for subsidized housing, the city prioritizes people who are medically the most vulnerable.

Greenwalt said the city had to take down the encampments on L, K, and M Streets NE because the tents were forcing pedestrians to walk in the street. The luxury apartment construction also posed safety concerns. She said the tents were attracting rodents and the streets needed cleaning.

"They can come inside where they're protected from the elements," Greenwalt said, emphasizing that the city is one of a handful of jurisdictions in the country where homeless people have a legal right to enter a shelter. "We have capacity right now."

Asked about allegations that the shelters are infested with bed bugs and offer low-quality food, Greenwalt said, "I think some of the concerns that I have heard are legitimate," and added that "we're trying to think very broadly about how we can better meet people's needs."

Ian Shapira is a features writer on the local enterprise team and enjoys writing about people who have served in the military and intelligence communities. He joined the Post in 2000 and has covered education, criminal justice, technology, and art crime. Follow @ianshapira