

*Economy*

## **Lawmaker Spends the Night in A Homeless Camp, Brings Back Lessons to His Colleagues**

*Think Progress, by Bryce Covert, Jun 1, 2016*

Tam Nguyen, a member of the city council of San Jose, California, decided to spend part of his Memorial Day weekend in Portland, Oregon. But instead of browsing the city's cafes and doughnut shops, Nguyen spent the night sleeping in the Right To Dream Too homeless encampment.

Nguyen has been on the council for a year, and in that time he says his colleagues have constantly dismissed the idea of supporting encampments, arguing that they foster crime and other social ills, favoring instead to talk about building permanent housing for the homeless. But he says those discussions have dragged on for years and he had had enough of talk without action. He accepted an invitation to visit Right To Dream Too "out of frustration," he said, and "to experience for myself the good and the bad of it."

He says what he found was a highly functional community, if one that could use improvements. People living there told him "we want safety, we're tired of being beat up and kicked and harassed on the street, we want a safe night's sleep, a good night's sleep," he said.

"It's very safe and it's very desirable for people who need a place to sleep. Of course it could be improved in many ways."

One important improvement would be sanitation. Nguyen said he didn't get much sleep himself because he was fending off "fat" rats all night. There also isn't much in the way of toilet or shower facilities, but there are plans to move the encampment within the next six months to somewhere that will have those in place.

Even with its flaws, however, Nguyen was impressed by what he saw. "All desire to behave well," he said. "It functions very, very well."

Now he's going to bring his experience back to share with his colleagues in San Jose as a way to argue for exploring the option of supporting encampments while plans for more permanent housing slowly grind on. In 2014, the city tore down one of the largest homeless camps in the nation.

"I have a lot to say to them," he said with a laugh. "I'll have a hard time being polite."

But he wants them to get away from hypotheticals and listen to what things are like for those going without their own homes. "In your head my friend, you are afraid of the unknown," he said. "Everyone said it's not a good idea, it's unsafe, [people will] commit more crime. I went there and saw for myself and it's the opposite."

While some homeless people can find a place to sleep in a shelter, those spaces fill up quickly and some of the homeless may have been disqualified for past incidents. In San Jose, less than a third of the population was staying in a shelter of some kind during a census taken in 2015; on the other hand, more than 2,800 people were going without shelter, including 778 people in encampments.

Nguyen's ultimate goal is to raise awareness around the struggles facing the homeless and to get the city council to consider trying out a partnership — with a community group, volunteer group, or even the homeless themselves — to support their efforts to create encampments. "Just like Portland, get out of their way, let them do it, and we give them support," he explained.

Many cities spend time and money trying to dismantle homeless encampments. But others have gone a different route. Seattle's mayor has proposed having the city create camps as a short-term measure to deal with the exploding homeless population. Indianapolis passed a law this year that bans the city from destroying camps unless there are enough housing units and resources for all of the residents.

Nguyen doesn't want his fellow city council members to do what he did. But he at least wants them to learn from his experience. "I'm more of an activist now," he said of his experience in Portland. "I need to motivate this council and leaders to be real human beings... Get out of your castle and go down on the street."

"That's the reality, it's not fiction," he added. "And we live with it."