

Most Cities Evict Their Homeless Before Big Events. Philly Is Trying Something New.

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This week, tens of thousands of people will converge on Philadelphia to attend the Democratic National Convention. They'll swarm a city that is home to roughly 670 people currently living without shelter.

In other cities, the potential clash between swelling crowds on the streets and people who may call those streets home has been handled by simply pushing the homeless aside. When San Francisco hosted the Super Bowl in February, it relocated homeless people from particular areas, with some homeless people reporting that their belongings were confiscated, and while it said it would give them slots at a shelter, the shelter already had a huge waiting list. When the Pope came to visit New York City, the city swept nearby homeless encampments and threatened to ticket and arrest anyone who didn't leave.

Before hosting the Republican National Convention last week, Cleveland, Ohio enacted new restrictions that effectively criminalized being homeless near the convention center. The ACLU successfully challenged the rules on behalf of a homeless advocacy group.

Philadelphia, however, is taking a very different approach.

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Rather than rely on crackdowns and arrests, the city has spent recent weeks ramping up outreach efforts and offering resources to open up 110 new beds for any homeless people who want to come inside during the chaos of the convention.

The city is partnering with advocates who already work with people on the street. "We've been working really closely with the city...to make sure that people are treated humanely and safely," said Laura Weinbaum of Project HOME, an organization that coordinates outreach to Philadelphia's homeless.

This more compassionate approach worked well the last time Philadelphia used it, when the Pope visited it on his trip through the United States. The city implemented the same plan for that visit as the one it will use for the DNC. Outreach teams were expanded and often paired with staff from the Department of Behavioral Health or certified formerly homeless peer specialists.

"It was pretty effective," Weinbaum said. "The time the Pope was here was a pretty major event and pretty stressful and disruptive time for people, but as far as we know there were no involuntary commitments" to shelters.

That experience may set the city up for success this time as well, even if the DNC brings more challenges because it's unclear which areas will be off limits or overly crowded. "I think we have a fairly good system in place," she said. "The practice made this a little bit easier."

And while the extra resources the city is offering are temporary and spurred by a special event, Weinbaum still sees it as a positive step toward helping the homeless community. Many people who go without shelter may find it difficult to make a long-term commitment to coming inside, so being able to do so in a more limited way can ease the transition. "What we have found often with these short-term interventions is they do encourage people to come in in a different way," she said. "Once people are into the system, if they are interested in the next step and the next step and the next step hopefully that will be made available to them."

"Our hope is this would be a first step," she said. "Even if the reason resources became available is because of the DNC, obviously we want to make hay when the sun shines."