



*Independent Living Resources*  
4439 Mormon Coulee Road  
La Crosse, WI 54601  
(608) 787-1111

May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024

To The Board of Public Works:

The intention of this letter is to oppose the proposed clearing of an encampment within our community.

I have worked with the unsheltered population for well over three years now, and throughout this time, I have had to provide support to a population who is continually oppressed, devalued and dehumanized by people and systems in our society. Although there are many contributing factors as to what leads to these feelings and experiences, one of the large contributing factors to these things traces directly back to the near constant clearance of encampments in our community over the last several years. It is sustained and continued trauma that our unsheltered neighbors are forced to go through against their will.

It is a well-known fact that our community does not have enough shelter space to adequately shelter the entire population of unsheltered individuals in the City of La Crosse, and yet, The Board of Public Works continues to vote and add areas to the no-camping areas within the city. Perhaps the idea of this is to force people to “figure it out”, but it’s not that simple – especially when large encampments are cleared out and lose connection to the services designed to assist them in ending their homelessness or assist them in accessing life-saving medical care.

Not too long ago, I had the privilege of working with an individual who was experiencing homelessness in our area. This person had been staying at an encampment with other individuals and was building capacity for further service connection and support from the Homeless Outreach Team and the other agencies that are a part of the HOT Collaborative. This individual’s encampment was cleared out, and because of this, the individual opted to relocate to an area that was hardly ever an area that people tried to camp to

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survive in. This individual became disconnected from services and was not seen for quite some time by any social services providers. Several weeks after the encampment was cleared and they were forced to relocate, this individual was found deceased in their tent. Although it is impossible to determine whether the death was something that could have been prevented or not, there is a possibility that had this individual not been isolated in a location without any service connection or people to stay with, life saving measures could've been taken. This individual perished alone, having been forced to move somewhere off the radar due to encampment clearance.

It is inhumane to continue to remove individuals from encampments without providing any other place for them to go. I want to acknowledge that I fully believe and understand that encampments are not the answer – they are unsafe, hazardous, and inhumane, but without any other solutions, what is the option? If this encampment is indeed cleared out, people are going to be forced to camp in locations that are already on the no-camping list. This will result, and already has resulted in individuals being ticketed. These tickets, when gone unpaid, add up and can eventually result in being incarcerated due to the number of unpaid tickets.

I ask to each member of the Board of Public Works the following questions:

- 1) If this encampment is cleared, is it helping or hindering the goal of bringing homelessness to a functional zero in our community?
  
- 2) If this encampment is cleared, residents will potentially be forced to stay in other areas, some completely isolated from society and service connection. How does this help individuals in accessing the services designed to help them end their homelessness?



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- 3) How would the clearing of this encampment help residents access medical care, clean water, food, and other necessities?
- 4) How does this impact our emergency response systems when people are in remote and dangerous locations needing help, sometimes life-saving help?
- 5) Where will people be permitted to go if this encampment is cleared, knowing we have no more shelter space and all other areas on the no-camping list?
- 6) If this encampment is not cleared out, what is the plan to enforce the goals of Pathways Home so that a surge shelter is created within the next several months so that people can be in a safer location and out of the marsh if they choose to?

I thank you for taking the time to read this, and I hope you are able to make the decision to not clear this encampment and continue to advocate and push for solutions that help individuals access services, as well as advocating for a surge shelter within the immediate future.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Michael Fitzpatrick'.

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