

Call to Action on “Sweeps” of Unhoused People, approved by Albuquerque Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, December 4, 2022

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Rationale

The City of Albuquerque continues a practice of “sweeping” areas where unhoused people have set up shelters. We consider any action that removes, confiscates, or destroys the personal property of people experiencing homelessness to be, as they themselves call it, a “sweep.” However officials may characterize these actions, they are immoral and a violation of fundamental human rights. We note that the People of the City of Albuquerque, by popular vote, amended the Albuquerque City Charter in 1971 to specifically commit the city government, through its Council, to “protect and promote human rights and human dignity,” to “prohibit discrimination,” and to “take whatever action is necessary” to effect these purposes. (Article VIII, ABQ City Charter).

Carrying out confiscatory sweeps of sites where unhoused persons in Albuquerque seek shelter highly impacts multiply-marginalized and underrepresented communities. These actions are also contrary to the espoused City policy of harm reduction, disproportionately harming persons belonging to racial and ethnic communities affected by homelessness, in particular people of African descent, Indigenous Peoples and persons of Hispanic/Latino origin, including women and LGBTQ persons.

During the cold of winter, sweeps are a violent imposition of state power over the most vulnerable members of our society—people living without adequate housing. As a result of these sweeps, people lose vital, life-supporting possessions, and communities of care and safety. Often these remove-and-destroy actions take place with the owner present or briefly away for necessary activities like health care, counseling or meeting legal commitments.

Once their belongings have been confiscated, these community members then have nowhere to go to rest in safety, resulting in constant and futile migration of groups from one sidewalk to another, one vacant lot to another, one overpass to another. This ill-advised and ineffective approach is nothing more than the City of Albuquerque further damaging the most vulnerable members of our community, compounding their trauma and insecurity, and, worsening the problems of the persons living outside and those with whom they interact.

The confiscation and destruction of warm clothing, personal possessions, food items, identification documents, and shelters not only strips those living outside of essential survival resources but also wastes compassionately donated material resources. Private and public organizations and individuals who, faithful to their deepest values, provide “food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the poorly clothed, shelter to the stranger, care to the sick” see their compassionate efforts dumped into solid waste disposal trucks.

A further cost to our city of this practice is that it forces those who carry out the sweep into brutal, degrading behavior. Our city workers and their families may be paying an emotional cost for the cruel work they are asked to do--in de-humanizing the homeless, our city employees are themselves dehumanized, by order of the city.

The city of Albuquerque can implement alternatives to ticketed notification and sweeping of tent encampments. The Westside Emergency Housing Center (WEHC) offers only temporary shelter and is not an adequate short-term solution for those who don't want to leave their possessions, pets, or partners, or who fear infection, theft, or violence based on prior personal or community experience. Listening to the voices and experience of those most directly affected by stays at the WEHC, anyone can clearly hear the inadequacy of this "solution" as a response to the problem.

Sweeps of sites where unhoused persons seek shelter, with the destruction of their personal possessions, thereby exposing them to harsh conditions without resources, is immoral, inhumane and flies in the face of the declared position of our city, that we respect human rights and the dignity of every person.

Call to Action:

The Albuquerque Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends cries out to the City of Albuquerque, "Stop the Sweeps." In keeping with Friends' Testimonies on Community and Equality—recognizing the dignity of all before God-- we support individuals and families experiencing homelessness in gaining access to life-sustaining resources. We call on the city to create solutions that respect the rights and dignity of all persons within its jurisdiction.

Options exist that respect the rights and dignity of all persons in our city. Alternatives to sweeps include:

- Providing Safe Outdoor Spaces—according to the current Integrated Development Ordinance (IDO), to be implemented immediately and without burdensome limitations;
- Broadening the concept of respite care to be offered at the Gateway Center, implementing immediately;
- Greatly expanding the hotel voucher program, for up to 90 days during the coldest weather. Many who fear going to the WEHC would gratefully accept a hotel room with a locked door;
- Implementing regular visits to group outdoor shelter sites by case managers and navigators who can build relationships and guide people into safer settings (this approach would require sweeps to end so that case managers can locate community members for follow-up);
- Acknowledging that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of homeless community members in our midst and allowing at least some areas of the "commons" within our city to accept the presence of unhoused persons without fear of brutal official response.

The time is now to begin constructive alternatives.