

Most recently we have received a lot of questions about an increase in unsheltered homeless folks putting up tents under the I37 Bridge near McCullough and Brooklyn. Some people are pleased to see the unsheltered clients having these tents, others are concerned about the rising numbers and what that might mean for our city, this neighborhood etc. Mostly I think folks are rightfully concerned about how we care for those in need all the time, and during these difficult COVID times; while also managing the neighborhood, the churches and homes near here and keeping our city well cared for. They wonder if CAM has anything to do with this current situation and what is being done.

First CAM has not been passing out tents. This is not something we typically do at any time because our goal is to provide immediate assistance with clothing, food, resources and help clients access supportive services in community. We agreed to be a designated homeless hub for the City during COVID and increase the number of days, hours, and items we provide this population. It has truly been a miracle and has worked well despite our own concerns about managing this. Most recently and really not until end of November or December clients began putting up tents, caring people started giving out tents and the City made the short term decision to allow this (when in the past they were usually asked to move before too many were put up). This was done because there are less places for people to congregate and go inside for warmth due to COVID. As you can imagine in years past churches and other nonprofits opened temporary warming places at night where folks could go inside. These are not as available because of social distancing issues.

Generally speaking, we have not seen a huge number of new people. Many of these are people that we have known that suffer from mental health issues or substance abuse issues and find it hard to use shelters. They typically sleep in various location, usually more hidden, and not in large groups with tents. Because this has been allowed out of the utmost of compassion, some unintended consequences have resulted. This area has become a little more dangerous as our homeless friends try to manage things themselves to include violence and serious criminal activity. The area becomes unsafe due to health issues, and finally it spills out into the neighborhood and folks start to clash. This kind of thing is not good for those we serve or the neighborhood.

So what is happening? Our government and the community have a significant amount of resources (dollars) being devoted to help folks relocate, access housing, hotels, and other supportive services. Street outreach workers (from a variety of nonprofits-Centro, SARAH, SAMM, Corazon, Haven) visit the encampment and people are being guided to access help. The staff with the City of San Antonio are also very helpful. Tex Dot actually owns this property and has shared that it must be cleaned out. This has been the overall plan but the City may have waited a little longer. However, due to a recent increase in crime, the health concerns, and neighborhood wellbeing and direction from Tex dot, this will be cleaned out on Wednesday February 3rd. CAM is not overtly in charge of any of this. We have an enormous calling and sense of responsibility for our neighborhood and for those we serve. However, our mission is to provide important items like food, showers, clothing and information to this population. As part of this goal and because of the relationships we have built with our clients and this neighborhood, we are supporting this effort while also trying to develop a transition plan. We will be actively helping during the cleanup and providing our clients with information about it ahead of time, and then providing resources like rolling duffle bags so that they can gather their items.

There have been some rumors that don't appear to be true about other cities bussing people into SA (this may be true but is not what we are seeing on our campus). Other concerns about their being a "tent city" ... I dislike that because we are talking about 45 or 50 tents and this is very new and has only been allowed for about 2 months.

Mostly we want you to hear that we are working hard alongside our City staff, other nonprofits, and our neighborhood to care for folks in need while working hard to maintain order and provide for health and safety of the neighborhood.

These are always complicated issues. We hope you will pray for us and if you feel led to serve, know someone who is led to serve, please do it by joining us (CAM) or another nonprofit of your choice (i.e. SAMM, Haven for Hope, Church Under the Bridge, Catholic Worker House, KRL, SA Hope Center, Centro...). It's important to be sending out a well-coordinated message and helping in a way that truly helps. Feel free to call me or email me with any questions or concerns (210) 223-4099 dwhite@cam-sa.org