

COMMENTARY

Hosting a Homeless Encampment Changed Our University



Stuart Bradford for The Chronicle

By Karen A. Snedker and Jennifer McKinney | MAY 06, 2018 ✓ PREMIUM

Tent encampments for those who are homeless are emerging across urban areas as a response to the large number of people who lack permanent shelter. In recent years, our institution, Seattle Pacific University, and other area colleges have hosted several of

these "tent cities," offering important lessons for us, our students, and the residents who temporarily have become our neighbors.

The Seattle metropolitan area ranks third nationally for the number of people living without permanent shelter, trailing only Los Angeles and New York City. Last year the city and surrounding county reported nearly 12,000 people living in shelters and other facilities, as well as outdoors, and nearly 5,500 more living in cars, in tents, under bridges, or riding the late-night buses. The rapid increase in our homeless population, and the visual reminder of tents in public spaces, led the city to declare a state of emergency on homelessness in 2015.

Sanctioned tent encampments that offer temporary housing and other social services represent a critical stopgap for cities short on housing. From last November through February, our campus hosted the oldest of these sanctioned tent encampments, called Tent City 3, for the third time since 2012. Seattle University and the University of Washington have also hosted this tent city, which moves, along with its residents, to a different location every three months (as stipulated by city charter, to avoid creating a

permanent encampment, as well as to raise citywide awareness of homelessness).

The tent-city community is distinctive: It is democratically organized and self-managed by the residents, must follow a strict code of conduct, and operates in partnership with a local nonprofit group. The camp also works with local religious groups to find host locations within the city.

The collaboration between the tent city and our university can serve as a model for neighborliness. On move-in day, more than 300 students and staff and faculty members welcomed our new neighbors by helping them set up camp.

Having the tent city on campus allowed us to bridge two disparate communities. While some students may independently seek opportunities for service learning, volunteering, and internships with groups that serve people who are homeless, hosting a community on their own campus brings awareness to many more people. These interactions humanize those who are homeless, who often feel invisible and unheard.

As a Christian university, we also see hosting the tent city as a way to live out our faith commitment. We are learning to connect to each other by sharing meals, holding classroom exchanges and educational forums, offering health-care services (such as a foot-care clinic), and creating artwork and poetry. Tent-city residents were given access to certain university facilities, including the Student Union Building and library, as well as campus Wi-Fi. (They did not take classes, but sometimes attended as guest speakers. We have proposed working with our School of Education and other schools to offer them educational opportunities and résumé assistance in the future.)

In turn, the residents staffed a welcome desk and led tours for visitors to the camp. As the students and the tent city residents got to know each other — over coffee, in classroom and other settings — we saw a palpable shift in how each group viewed the other.

Hosting the tent city has also provided us with educational opportunities. Our research has found that hosting the encampment has significantly reduced negative stereotypes about homelessness. While campus support for the tent city was already high before the camp set up here, a survey found that

support was even higher after we hosted the camp, with students showing the largest gains.

The tent city also served as an unconventional classroom. A small group of students conducted applied research, interviewing the camp residents about their pathways into homelessness and their experiences living in tent cities. Even after taking a class on homelessness in America, some students struggled to engage with camp residents, but eventually students began to hang out at the encampment and gained their trust.

Those students considered it a privilege to hear residents' stories, and described their experience as "wonderful" and "humbling." As one student said, "This experience has changed me ... as a researcher and a person."

Another student told us: "I'm not passionate about homelessness. I'm passionate about people. And people shouldn't be homeless. ... So I will advocate. I will be an ally. I will treat people who are homeless as people, saying hello and shaking their hands."

Such nontraditional learning spaces have the power to transform learning. Many tent-city residents found it convenient to live on our campus, near city services and bus lines that provided transportation to jobs, and liked the friendly atmosphere. One resident said: "I like the neighborhood, it's quiet at night. All the kids that come from the school here to talk to us, you treat us like you'd treat anybody else that isn't homeless." Another resident called living on the campus "probably the best experience I have had being homeless. We are getting the students coming over and actually sitting down, holding a conversation with us like we are normal. Not going, 'Oh, here are some donations. Whatever. Bye.' "

But while most residents appreciated our university's efforts to integrate the two communities, the reality of living in a tent was ever present. As one resident said, "It's still a tent city."

Unfortunately, hosting tent encampments does not provide a transition out of homelessness. The engagement of colleges does, however, represent an important step toward greater education and understanding. The visibility of Tent City 3 on our campus stands as a testament to the growing inequality in Seattle. It also illustrates a model of

hope about how, together, we might support people who are homeless. Cities need to move toward permanent solutions for homeless people. But in the meantime, political leaders across the nation might look to sanctioned, self-managed tent encampments — and colleges might consider hosting them, as a model for short-term measures.

Karen A. Snedker is an associate professor of sociology and Jennifer McKinney is a professor of sociology at Seattle Pacific University.

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