

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NINA MOINI: In a few hours, the St. Paul City Council will hold a public hearing on plans to clear homeless encampments starting next month. Mayor Kaohly recently announced her office is working with the county to close three encampments due to public health and safety concerns. The city says around 200 people are staying at the largest of these sites, which is in Pig's Eye Park near the Mississippi River. The city plans to close that encampment on August 5.

The council has received more than 100 written comments, mostly urging the city to halt its plans. Justin Lewandowski is among those asking for a pause. He's director of Open Hands Midway, which provides free meals, groceries, and supplies to community members. He joins me now. Thanks for your time, Justin.

JUSTIN LEWANDOWSKI: Absolutely. Great to be here.

NINA MOINI: So I understand you were on a phone call this morning that's sort of like a regularly scheduled call with the city and some county staff and some providers of different resources, like yourself. What was the conversation like this morning? Are you feeling any better after that?

JUSTIN LEWANDOWSKI: Not entirely. I think that some of the biggest concerns still are the fact that we just don't have any places for folks living in our encampment communities to go. There's still the long-term problem of the coordinated entry list being well over 1,000 folks. Here in the Midway, where Open Hands is located, we're across the street from the Safe Space shelters, which is constantly full. A member here at Bethlehem in the Midway Church, we're kind of the overflow of the shelter in the mornings.

And so, it's just very clear that our shelter systems are at capacity, and there are no real long-term housing placement solutions in place. And so, the biggest concerns and questions I think that many folks still have is, where are folks supposed to go? Along with that, some other additional questions, too, are, what is the data analysis that's driving this decision?

All public health knowledge, including the American Public Health Association, say that forced removal or displacements from encampments are actually counterintuitive to public health. So the evidence overwhelmingly shows that clearing these camps just disrupts long-term relationships with service providers, housing coordinators. It's more likely for folks to lose documents that they're going to need for services. But also, it's more deadly. It's actually more dangerous for our unhoused neighbors when they're displaced from these camps.

So I think there's a lot of questions about what's the data that's driving this, when so much overwhelming public health evidence has shown that these kinds of sweeps and displacements across the country are not only ineffective, they're actually extremely costly to the taxpayer. I also think that-- what's the data that the city is going to measure and how are they going to measure whether or not this is successful.

So, overwhelmingly, still a lot of questions. I know Assistant Mayor Baker is also presenting today at 12:30. So, I hope to hear more, but I think that there's still a lot of looming questions about what's driving this, what's the data. But also, just a lot of people really feel blindsided by this swift timeline and the lack of coordination and collaboration with the encampment residents themselves, but as well as many, many different partners who have boots on the ground.

NINA MOINI: So can you give us a sense for what it's like at, let's say, the Pig's Eye Park encampment? Because my understanding is people have been there for a very long time. And I'm wondering if you can give a sense for about how many people you would say are staying in these three encampments altogether.

JUSTIN LEWANDOWSKI: Well, there's rough estimates from a lot of folks who are doing a lot of the mutual aid, community outreach, "boots on the ground" kind of work, about 400 total between the Fish Hatch encampment, which the city refers to as Pig's Eye. There's also Shepherd and K-Mart. So, about 400 total, are rough estimates that folks are saying. And I think everyone can agree that the encampments are not a permanent solution, and they shouldn't exist indefinitely.

However, we know for a fact that when we disrupt these encampments, the health outcomes, the services that are disrupted, the relationships, it's just not conducive to, I think, the overall goal that the city has stated. But from my firsthand experience, what I think a lot of people don't know, there is issues of crime, there are overdoses. But here, in the Midway neighborhood alone, in the month of May, we had 67 overdoses. So, yes, the opioid crisis is a huge and complex problem, as well as the housing crisis.

But the other thing that you're not going to hear from a lot of the news media and stories is that there's a lot of joy. There's a lot of community. There are gardens. There's chickens. There's puppies. There's camaraderie and friendship. At my first time down at the Fish Hatch, I was at a community meal where neighbors and friends brought down a grill. We had a cookout. There was a volleyball game in the background. We brought out medical supplies, menstruation supplies, harm reduction supplies, but also, an art table.

I have a piece of art here in my office from one of the encampment residents that it's just, there's so much more to the story than, I think, than what we've heard. And yes, there are problems with crime, but also, I think that if you talk to any of the residents down at the Fish Hatch, they'd tell you that they're aware of that, and they would like to be at the table to talk about what we can do and how do we do this better than what's been laid out before us by Mayor Her and her administration.

NINA MOINI: We had Mayor Her on, I think, a few weeks ago now, but the timeline the city was giving was this month of July as time for everybody to prepare. I know people, including yourself, say, they weren't brought into that decision for even this month-long getting everybody ready for what's going on. People would have liked a seat at the table, it sounds like, to talk about what that timeline would look like.

Mayor Her said there are public safety concerns. Anytime there is an encampment, it does draw negative activity as well. She mentioned assaults and just fires, other concerns, and wanting to get people cleared, I guess, before the winter sets in. From your perspective, what would it take to make sure that every person-- I know you're talking about maybe 400 people-- had a plan as to where they were going to go, had shelter space, or somewhere better to go? How long do you think something like that would take?

JUSTIN LEWANDOWSKI: Well, just for context, here in the Midway, a good friend of mine who does street outreach here, they were able to get eight people into long-term housing solutions, and that took about six months.

NINA MOINI: Wow.

JUSTIN LEWANDOWSKI: So when we're talking about placing folks into long-term housing options, even shelter, it takes time. But also, there's a lot of realities that people don't realize as well that are huge barriers for our neighbors at the encampments to get even into housing. Right now, I think the average waiting list just to get a meeting with someone to get your Social Security card takes months.

Lost documents-- there's also the issue of not having a reliable mailing address. Me and several other faith-based organizations and community members are talking about how we could maybe open up our churches to be mailing centers for these sensitive documents to be mailed. But there's just so many other interventions that we could have done had we been at the table to talk about how do we remove some of those-- they're overlooked barriers-- documentation, storage.

But the other thing, too, is that everybody knows that we're not going to be able to find housing for these folks in the deadline that was given to us. But there are ways that we could actually stabilize-- if we were to just take a minute to pause, in Operation Metro Surge, we saw the power of St. Paul and Minnesota communities coming together. Had we had more time to build and develop a public and private partnership, we could have talked about the minute investments.

There's one porta potty at the Fish Hatch encampment of 200 folks. Let's imagine for a minute had the city decided, you know what? Let's bring together everyone at the table. Let's talk about this. Maybe a few more porta potties, hand-washing stations, basic sanitation. Here in the ELCA in St. Paul, we've got [INAUDIBLE]. We've got Open Hands Midway. We've got Zion Community Commons right here in the Midway. We provide meals for thousands of folks every week.

If we were to actually have basic sanitation supplies, basic coordination with all the different groups, nonprofits, mutual aid partners, we could drastically see quality of life at these encampments increase, if we would just have a seat at the table, especially the encampment residents themselves. A lot of these things that I'm mentioning are coming directly from them, and they haven't been invited to the table. And we're really excited that many of them are going to be at the public hearing for their voices to finally be heard by our council members.

NINA MOINI: So, what would the best practices or the safest or the best process look like from here out, from your perspective?

JUSTIN LEWANDOWSKI: I just think we need to pause. I don't know why this deadline has been so cemented into our reality right now. But even if it was just to come together and talk about OK, even if we do close down the encampments, the other problem is, no camps are allowed. What does that actually mean for people who are unhoused living in the city of St. Paul? What's the criminal penalties? What's actually going to happen in this ecosystem once these encampments are closed?

So, we got to figure out, one, we need more time to figure out what are the real realities of what's going to happen. Because a lot of people are either going to move farther out and break and sever those connections and relationships with the service providers and those pathways to housing. Many people will probably go downtown or right here in the Midway. So we need to have a crisis response to these sweeps in terms of meaningful services. And we definitely need more time to figure out, along with the Medicaid and SNAP cuts, hunger and food.

And now, with 400 displaced neighbors being scattered to the winds, we're going to need to have a conversation about what this actually looks like in terms of public health outcomes and emergency services and what we're going to build towards. So I think that if we were to just to pause and to tap into our greatest resource right now, which is St. Paul residents, neighbors, and faith communities, we could build something much better than a rushed plan in less than a month.

NINA MOINI: Justin, thanks so much for your perspective. I really appreciate your time.

JUSTIN Absolutely. Thanks for having me.

LEWANDOWSKI:

NINA MOINI: Justin Lewandowski is director of the St. Paul nonprofit Open Hands Midway. This afternoon on *All Things Considered* with Clay Masters right here on MPR News, hear from people living at the encampments in a report from our Cari Spencer.