

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NINA MOINI: Our top story today, the city of St. Paul plans to clear a homeless encampment at Pig's Eye Park along the Mississippi River on August 5. Until then, city and county staff will regularly visit the site to try to help the people living there find shelter. That's according to an announcement sent out yesterday. The city plans to close other encampments using what it calls a coordinated transition process. St. Paul Mayor Kaohly Her is on the line now to talk about these plans and tell us a bit more. Thanks for being here, Mayor Her.

KAOHLY HER: Thank you for having me on.

NINA MOINI: I wondered if city and county staff have begun visiting Pig's Eye Park today, as is part of this plan. What are they going to be doing differently starting today? Because I assume that staff is out there regularly.

KAOHLY HER: Yeah. So I will say that, I mean, I have visited the encampments personally. Staff has been out there for years, as the work of ground assessment and working with these encampments started long before my own administration here. And so we continued the work of connecting those who are there to the resources that are needed, whether it is mental health support, whether it's housing. We've had active teams working on this, which was a continuation of the work from the previous administration.

And so I anticipate that we are going to continue to be out there. It is not a change. It's not like we weren't there before, but we are going to continue to stay connected to the community because it will require that we maintain these relationships to be able to get people to the resources that are needed.

NINA MOINI: Can you talk a little bit, Mayor Her, about the decision making process and who's involved in deciding when it's time to go ahead and clear encampments, especially when they continue to pop up in the same places? What are you taking into consideration?

KAOHLY HER: I mean, there's a lot to take into consideration. So this isn't a decision made by one person or one entity. There has been work with not only internal department teams, whether it is fire and police, our Department of Safety and Inspections, our Office of Neighborhood Safety-- the teams that we've actually put together in order to work with the unsheltered population, but also our external partners. Our partners, like those who provide housing, partners at the county and at the state, that we've had long ongoing conversations.

And I want to remind all of our listeners that this unsheltered population and situation is not new. We as a country have been dealing with this issue for as long as I've ever been aware of having consciousness around this issue. So this is a struggle that our entire country deals with because we do not, at all levels of government, provide the necessary resources in order to address this issue.

NINA MOINI: We've read about reports of fires there, unfortunately, sexual assaults, two overdose-related deaths, other emergencies too, that put people there and surrounding neighbors at risk as well. Do you have a sense for how many people are currently living at the Pig's Eye Park encampment?

KAOHLY HER: So there's approximately 120 people at the Pig's Eye, and then at the other two locations, approximately 30 people.

NINA MOINI: OK. So this past winter, we talked here on the show with a leader in the city's Department of Safety and Inspections about this-- I believe the same encampment here near Pig's Eye Park. They were regularly, visiting the area. How will the work change now that there are plans to clear this encampment? Is it better to do it in the summer versus the winter?

KAOHLY HER: Yeah, and this is something that weighs heavily on me. There's a lot of feelings on both sides of whether we should close these encampments or that we should continue to maintain them and sustain them. But I have to remind our residents here that we have very cold winters here, and that it would ultimately lead to a much worse outcome that these camps continue to grow because of lack of enforcement and all of our surrounding areas as well, and the support systems there that we have people coming to these encampments. And so it is absolutely critical that this is the time period. It gives us the leeway in getting people connected to the resources that they need.

NINA MOINI: How do you plan to help to make sure that people are aware and ready for the day when the clearing of the encampment does begin?

KAOHLY HER: I mean, like I said, we are out there regularly. All of our different teams are out there regularly, and providing communication, and continuing to do the outreach to have the support necessary for them. We have been working with our partners on increasing capacity for beds, having assessments, and working with our partners on ensuring that there are slots for the addiction and mental health support.

But again, just a reminder that these entities are not city resources. The city does not deliver health and human services. We do not deliver the plans for the types of housing that is needed, although we help in construction and working and in locating them. But we do need all of our partners in this work together, which is why it has been an extremely coordinated effort and a conscious thing that we are doing together.

NINA MOINI: Can you talk a little bit more about what you mean by closing other encampments on a rolling basis? What do you mean by that, rolling basis?

KAOHLY HER: Yeah. So we have two other encampments, the Lorient and the junkyard one. And so those, like I said, have about approximately 30 people, each one of those sites. And that we do that when we don't close the encampments, that what we've seen happen when other encampments from previous years were closed, people were literally transported from those into other encampments. And in order for us to maintain enforcement with our ordinances, we'd have to go through systematically and look at the three sites and address them accordingly.

NINA MOINI: So you don't exactly when the others will close? You're keeping an eye on them for the time being?

KAOHLY HER: Yes. I mean, we do have a plan to address those after we work through the Pig's Eye one. Yes.

NINA MOINI: OK. You mentioned-- and we all that sometimes people will just move and they'll gather somewhere else within a city, sometimes maybe going to another city. How do you coordinate? I know you coordinate a lot with the county, and it's not all on the city. But can you talk a little bit about coordination just between surrounding cities, Minneapolis, other surrounding suburbs?

KAOHLY HER: Yea. So I wanted to say that we have been looking at this in sort of three different phases. The first one is the short-term phase, which focuses on the preparation and coordination leading to the closure. The next is what we would call the intermediate phase, which is that after the encampments are closed and individuals begin to settle into a new normal, how do we make sure that we get those individuals the support that they need. And then lastly, it is the long-term phase of creating a regional approach to support those experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

I had a conversation with our St. Paul delegation yesterday, and they were tough conversations, and people were very honest about their feelings around these encampments. But my reminder to all of our partners and our friends is that this is a statewide issue. This is not a St. Paul issue, this is a statewide issue, and that every level of government has a lever that they should be pulling.

And at the city, ultimately, we experience the consequences of when every level of government fails their ability to do their jobs, that we would need to spend billions of dollars into housing and infrastructure if we want to be able to house all of the unsheltered population. We would have to provide billions of dollars into Health and Human Services if we were to give people the resources that they need, so that then we don't have people ending up in encampments in which the enforcement happens at the city level.

And so, as much as I would love to be able to provide and deliver all of these resources and be able to deliver on housing and Health and Human Services, the city does not have the departments or the resources in order to do that. And what we can do is connect people, which is why that third phase is so critical, is that how do we have a more regional approach.

NINA MOINI: And you alluded to difficult feelings that people have around this. What do you hear from neighbors who live in the area surrounding an encampment, or people who work in the area or visit the area? What is the feedback like that you're getting there?

KAOHLY HER: Our city has such diverse thinking. But we are seeing a split half and half in that individuals who believe that we should close these encampments, because it is dangerous for those there. When we talk about public safety issues, it's not a matter of public safety to the general public. This is a public safety for the individuals there as well, that it is not humane or compassionate to allow these encampments to continue.

So we have people who really understand that it has to be close to those reasons. And then we have individuals who feel really strongly that we should allow these encampments to continue. And so we see both sides and we hear from both of them. And we are getting equal numbers of feedback from both perspectives.

NINA MOINI: Is part of the goal to get as many people into shelter-- it sounds like you're saying by the time winter begins? What happens if the clearing happens August 5 over at, say, Pig's Eye, and then September 5 it's back?

KAOHLY HER: I think that anybody who does work in the unsheltered homeless population understands that there will just be some individuals who will never accept help. And they may not want that help for many reasons why. And so I think that we all, as a society, have to come together and decide what do we do in these situations. Because it is unsafe for people to be out in the conditions that we have here.

And when someone doesn't want to accept that help, how do we intervene? What are the tools that we have? Because we do have to protect people, regardless of whether they choose this to be. But if it's in a dangerous situation, we should probably take some action to address it.

NINA MOINI: All right, Mayor Her, thanks very much for your time. We appreciate it.

KAOHLY HER: Thank you so much. I appreciate your time.

NINA MOINI: Thank you, St. Paul Mayor Kaohly Her.