

MPR News | Minnesota Now People at a growing St. Paul homeless encampment facing this winter's first subzero temperatures 01KBN63AT06WM5NTP44573X1

NINA MOINI: Just east of downtown Saint Paul, near Pig's Eye Park along the river, people at a homeless encampment are facing this winter's first subzero temperatures today. Recent reports say the camp has grown in the last six months, and comes at a time when several Saint Paul shelters say they're at capacity. It's a sight that's far away from many homeless support services and organizations.

Volunteers in the city's homeless response team have been regularly coming to the camp to provide supplies and support. For more on the situation, we have Angie Wiese on the line. She's the Director of Saint Paul's Department of Safety and Inspections. Thanks for your time this afternoon, Director.

ANGIE WIESE: Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: I really am happy to have you on today because we have seen some reporting from other outlets, KSTP-TV in particular, saying that volunteers at this site say there could be as many as 350 people there regularly. Can you tell me a little bit about this site? And what is your sense for just how big of an encampment it's become?

ANGIE WIESE: Yeah. That number is wildly inflated. We don't even have that many folks living outside in Saint Paul in all of Saint Paul. So at the Fish Hatchery encampment, which is what we call this space, we have about 80 residents there. And that can fluctuate a little more, a little less, because by nature this is a transient population. But we have residents there, around 80. Citywide, we have about 150 folks that we know are living outside at any one time.

NINA MOINI: What are you doing with those 150 people? Is there a sense that there would be shelter beds available for them if they wanted it? Or what are some of the steps that are being taken there?

ANGIE WIESE: So the city has several teams that are part of the optimal response team. HART, our Homeless Assistance Response Team, is one of those. We also have a CARES team that really focuses more on the physical health. So as you can imagine, living outdoors can provide some challenges healthwise. And those folks are trained with our unsheltered residents. And we also have a COAST team that's really more integrated with the police department, and their focus is on the mental health side.

But for the HART team in particular, we're visiting encampments every single day. We have really two pieces of that team. We have one part that is doing more of the outreach and doing things like housing assessments, which is needed in order to be provided housing through the continuum of care. And every county has a continuum of care. And a housing assessment needs to be done in order to get folks lined up with stable housing.

That's a critical part of the work that they do. And so because of that work, they know a lot about the folks who reside in our camps. They know their names and the different resources available to them, their circumstances, some of their challenges. Maybe they have a partner who doesn't receive services, but they do. So every-- we do an individualized assessment.

We also have a team that does more of the physical space management. So just like you have regular garbage pickup at your home, we coordinate regular garbage pickup at encampments to help keep them as clean and sanitary as possible. And that work is done on a routine basis. They're also removing things like abandoned tents or belongings that-- where people have moved on but left their belongings behind.

So that, they're in the camps almost every single day--

NINA MOINI: OK. When you're talking to people--

ANGIE WIESE: --talking about work for our residents.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, thank you. When you're talking to people at the camps, if you were to go out today, would you be able to say to the people, we have a bed for you available at a shelter? Or is it your understanding that the shelters are pretty much at capacity? I'm just wondering if that's a reason to keep the encampment going.

ANGIE WIESE: Well, it depends on what type of bed you're talking about. So most people won't leave. They consider this stable housing, so they aren't likely to leave it for a one night in an emergency shelter. So they're looking for more stable housing. And those come with a variety of factors. Not everybody is willing to take, I'll say, a risk on somebody who has been living outside for a year-plus.

But we work with every single individual to build them up to that point, and we will connect them with resources. And that, a lot of times, means landlords in permanent or more stable housing who are used to working with this population and understand the needs and have the resources at their apartment buildings to work with individuals.

And we've built that. That's all about relationships, and we've built those relationships over time. And when we do have folks who are ready for housing-- and by ready, I mean, like, they're ready. They want to-- because you're not going to force them. These are adults. They have free will. You're not going to force anyone to live somewhere that they don't want to live. So when they're ready to, we make that connection and--

NINA MOINI: OK. OK.

ANGIE WIESE: --work with them to get into stable housing.

NINA MOINI: OK. With the temperatures as cold as they are now, are there plans to clear the encampment at all? What would it take to clear this encampment, in your opinion?

ANGIE WIESE: Doing a camp closure is a rigorous effort on our part, and it takes a lot of community partners. We only close camps when they are unsafe. And I can't say that any camp would be considered safe. We don't want people living outside. But in some cases, there aren't good options, or there aren't good options right now. And that's what I mean about working with individuals. Just because they aren't ready right now doesn't mean they aren't ready forever. And if you're not ready to talk to us today, we'll be back tomorrow to try again.

But part of that effort is doing assessments. So, what do we know about the residents in the camp? Where are they likely to go? What are their other options? Some people don't have other options because of open warrants or past issues at previous residence. And so we need to take all of those factors into consideration.

We also have a police and fire department assessment before any closure, and we get their take on the space. But they're with us. Even in managing a camp, they will attend with us to help keep the contents down, educate folks on fire safety--

NINA MOINI: So no plans. So no plans to clear it, it sounds like.

ANGIE WIESE: We have no imminent plans to close Fish Hatchery at this time.

NINA MOINI: OK. And can you just remind me why it's called Fish Hatchery?

ANGIE WIESE: That's what this area is called in the city of Saint Paul. I think somebody had called it Pig's Eye, but we've always called this place Fish Hatchery.

NINA MOINI: OK. OK, that's good to know. Are there other encampments that you're keeping an eye on across the city? It sounds like in January, there were people evicted from an encampment on the east side of Saint Paul. That's obviously a while ago. Do you have a sense for if people are moving from encampment to encampment and how many there are across the city?

ANGIE WIESE: Yes, so we have about 80 people here. We know that we have about 150 people citywide. This is our largest encampment. We also don't use the word "evicted." Eviction is a legal action that we are not taking. So we close encampments for safety reasons, but eviction is not what happens.

We did close Bruce Vento in January. We closed Trout Brook this summer. And the population at Fish Hatchery grew a little bit each of those times. Not everyone from those locations went to Fish Hatchery, but some people did. People want to go where they feel safe, just like you and I want to live where we feel safe.

It might not be your idea of safe, but if they feel like they can live safely there, they will locate there. Others took us up on housing opportunities. They might have gone into a drug treatment program, and we support all of those decisions. We are trying to work our way towards a more stable housing situation on an individualized basis.

NINA MOINI: OK. So, no immediate plans to close the Fish Hatchery area encampment, and the city is keeping a close eye on it in these cold temperatures. Thank you so much for your time. Really appreciate it, Director Wiese.

ANGIE WIESE: You're very welcome. Thank you.

NINA MOINI: That was Angie Wiese, Director of Safety and Inspections for the City of Saint Paul.