

Homeless people scatter throughout Salt Lake Valley in wake of Operation Rio Grande

Downtown is safer after law enforcement action, but outlying neighborhoods are now bearing the brunt of illegal campers.

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Police are responding to frantic calls from residents who report homeless transients in nearby parks, alleyways and backyards — a reaction to the law enforcement initiative aimed at clamping down on crime around The Road Home shelter in downtown Salt Lake City.

Since the Aug. 14 onset of Operation Rio Grande, campers have scattered throughout Salt Lake City and beyond, looking for safe haven even though camping within city limits is illegal.

Rio Grande Street, Pioneer Park and 500 West are now much safer than they were before the law enforcement action, when the area was characterized as a lawless and sometimes violent open-air drug market, complete with discarded needles, garbage and human waste.

But the outcome of the operation also includes a marked increase in homeless campers in many neighborhoods, along the Jordan River and the foothills north of downtown.

The city's west side, for example, has been significantly impacted by the homeless dispersion, said Dennis Faris, chairman of the Poplar Grove Community Council.

Residents are on edge, he said. "There is enough of a criminal element integrated into that community ... you can never tell. ... Safety is an issue."

In Central City, Michael Iverson said he's seeing a significant increase in homeless campers.

"People aren't happy with the garbage left behind," he said. "And we hear loud arguments in the middle of the night. It's a powder keg when so many people are staying in the same area."

Community organizer Michael Clara said there is a visible increase of drug dealing and prostitution along North Temple west of the railroad viaduct. "People are saying thefts are up and their camping stuff is being stolen."

Police and the Utah Highway Patrol are responding quickly to complaints.

"We are getting the response we need," Clara said. "That's one of the positive aspects."

In an Aug. 29 Salt Lake City Council work session, Utah House Speaker Greg Hughes, R-Draper, said that he and others spearheading Operation Rio Grande knew such scattering would take place after the crackdown.

But as police push campers from one place to another, tensions have ratcheted up among those homeless people, leading in some cases to threats against city park employees.

In an Aug. 8 email, Lorna Vogt, deputy director of operations for Salt Lake City's Department of Public Services, warned that there would be "costs and consequences" of pushing people into parks, foothills and other open spaces.

"The most significant consequence for us is an increase in threats of violence reported by our parks and facilities crews who used to have good relationships with most transients," she said. "Now they are experiencing open hostility because people are tired of being chased around."

Although homelessness is not illegal, camping in Salt Lake City and other municipalities in the county is against the law. Simply asking campers to move along isn't the solution, Hughes said.

"You can't ask people to walk in perpetuity," he said. "We have to give people reasonable alternatives."

Those alternatives have yet to be formulated.

Councilwoman Erin Mendenhall asked Hughes during the work session how officials will deal with heroin addicts and traffickers who have now receded into the shadows of parks and neighborhoods. He was short on specifics, but Hughes did say that law enforcement will make it so difficult to sell drugs here that traffickers will eventually move elsewhere.

“I want Utah to be a place that is the worst place to sell drugs,” he said.

Homeless people have been hanging out in the Sugar House area in relatively small numbers for years. But there is an influx of people there, too.

A homeless man who identified himself only as Jeff said he’s noticed an upswing in homeless people around Fairmont Park.

“A couple of weeks ago, they started coming in,” he said. “And the police started coming every night and making sure no one was camping here.”

Jeff, and others like him, keep moving until they have to sleep.

“I don’t camp anywhere. I’m constantly on the move,” he said. “When I get tired, I lay down.”

Daniel White, 48, and Angela Nuhl, 37, relocated to the Fairmont Park area from Rio Grande Street three months ago, when things there became too dicey for them.

“People are starting to trickle up here [from Rio Grande] now,” he said. “I try to discourage them because I don’t want to see this park closed down.”

Outreach workers from Volunteers of America (VOA) Utah say they, too, are witnessing more homeless people in neighborhoods and outlying areas.

VOA outreach teams bring water, clothing and sleeping bags to homeless campers and try to steer them to service providers, including detox and mental health facilities.

People who have moved away from the Rio Grande district don’t know where to access everyday needs, like food and water, said VOA outreach worker Machele Nieto. Beyond that, regular clients have moved, apparently in reaction to a greater police presence throughout the city and county.

“We used to know where people were, so we could check up on them,” she said. “Now, we don’t know where they are.”

Not least among the issues of a dispersed homeless population is garbage and human waste. While campers in parks have access to restrooms and garbage cans, others who seek shelter along the Jordan River or the foothills don’t have those amenities.

That makes for a potential public health hazard, said Jorge Martinez, the community outreach and cleanup coordinator for Salt Lake County.

Groups of homeless campers along the river and in the foothills are up significantly since the onset of Operation Rio Grande, Martinez said.

“The amount of clutter and solid waste is much larger than a couple of weeks ago,” he said. “When it comes to solid waste and chemical hazards [particularly near the river], the entire community is affected.”

Homeless camps along the Jordan River are nothing new, but Martinez said that until recently few drug addicts lived there.

“The campers who have been there already are complaining they are being invaded by people from Salt Lake City,” he said. “They are claiming the drug users are coming out to the outlying areas and they don’t like it.”

How drug users, particularly heroin addicts, will get their fix outside Rio Grande remains to be seen. Drug traffickers may have to modify their behavior, too, seeking out addicts wherever they may be.

“The drug need is out there,” Mendenhall said. “And those dealers have clients.”

It doesn’t bode well for neighborhoods.