



July 8, 2022

Mayor Dave Bronson – Via Email
Assembly Chair Suzanne LaFrance – Via Email

Dear Mayor and Assembly Chair LaFrance,

The Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness (ACEH) and the Advisory Council of the Continuum of Care (CoC) write today to express concerns and provide possible solutions about the Municipality's current camping arrangements at Centennial Park. This letter is a joint effort as the entities responsible for the design of the Homeless Prevention Response System (HPRS) and as the conveners of HPRS stakeholders in Anchorage.

Our understanding is Centennial Campground (Centennial) has been opened for free admission to anyone to mitigate fire danger within the Municipality, but that the primary occupants are people experiencing homelessness (PEH) after the abatement of Davis Park and the closure of the Sullivan Arena. We know there are approximately 170-180 occupants currently at Centennial and a total of 300+ individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Anchorage.

To date, outreach, food, and other supplies have been provided through a variety of volunteers, service providers and the Houseless Resource Advisory Council (HRAC). Park and Recreation staff remain onsite to clean the campground and there is a two-person security team on-site. Yet, even with Parks and Recreation staff, security, and HRAC's volunteer presence and other supports, there are significant safety concerns that persist at Centennial.

- Bears continue to be an imminent threat to safety because the necessities of living at Centennial require items that are bear attractants – food, sunscreen, hygiene wipes, etc.
- With no screening of the individuals who are camping or have access to Centennial, vulnerable people are subject to exploitation while families also reside in the same area.
- There have been several medical incidents without any on-site supports or any entity in charge to ensure proper response is available.
- 911 remains elusive to many campers who have no means of outside communication without adequate access to charging devices.
- A lack of clarity remains on how long the free admission and stays at Centennial will be allowed or if all occupants need to leave at 14 days.

These are just a few of the issues we have encountered or had reported from various providers in our community. Regardless of whether the Municipality acknowledges that Centennial is currently a homelessness response, failure to implement immediate and significant changes in the operations leave Centennial a dangerous situation for all involved. **If substantial progress toward implementing the recommended changes is not made by July 14, 2022, out of deep care for people residing at Centennial, the surrounding community, and service providers, whose safety is of the utmost importance, we feel it necessary to suspend services and supports at Centennial.**

HUD has provided resources on how to create and manage inclusive public spaces where PEH camp. Each of these steps has several planning and action items. For purposes of this letter, we will provide the key highlights. Please note that many stakeholders within the HPRS have met and collaborated on how to assist in these planning efforts but were not involved in the current effort to use Centennial. We believe that coordination and planning with subject matter experts and providers is the only way any inclusive public space has a chance to be successful.

According to HUD, while inclusive public space management is not a solution to homelessness, it is a helpful way to mitigate the consequences of unsheltered homelessness on people and communities.¹

1) Create a collaborative plan for inclusive public space management built on a real-time assessment of needs that incorporates these principles:

- i. Centering racial equity.
- ii. Creating adequate time for planning.
- iii. Collaborating across sectors and systems.
- iv. Conducting intensive and persistent outreach and engagement.
- v. Promoting low-barrier pathways to permanent housing.
- vi. Ensuring the highest level of sanitation and health.
- vii. Communicating with the public and key stakeholders.

2) Execute and manage the plan.

3) Monitor progress and revise the plan.

Ensuring the highest level of sanitation and health at encampments and other unsheltered settings—This is the #1 priority of the inclusive space management plan. This includes:

- dealing with access to restrooms, handwashing, showers, and laundry;
- providing trash receptacles with regular trash pickup;
- providing a means for safe needle disposal and exchange;
- meeting basic nutritional needs and medical care;
- providing safe daytime and longer-term storage for personal belongings;
- establishing a means to support healthy pets;
- implementing Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), protocols including social distancing;
- how to protect people in unsheltered settings from climate- and weather-related dangers, such as heat stroke or frostbite; and
- contingencies for quickly connecting people to low-barrier shelters or other options in the face of extreme temperatures and emergencies, like storms and fires.

¹ [COVID-19 Homeless System Response: Protecting the Health and Well-being of People in Encampments and Other People Who Access Public Spaces.](#)

Starting with what we know about the current conditions², we suggest the following actions be undertaken immediately by the Municipality to address the issues we've outlined above in a manner that is consistent with the guidance from HUD:

1. Identify alternate areas for authorized camping (inclusive public space) within the Municipality;

Centennial at around 170-180 occupants is too big. The mix of individuals is unsafe. Other jurisdictions have considered various levels of encampments based on the number of occupants and then the attendant services available at each. Depending on the level of encampment either full time 24/7 staff or itinerant staffing through intensive outreach is necessary to address the needs of the encampment. Any encampment consisting of over 50 people requires 24/7 staffing to ensure the health and safety of the occupants of the encampment and neighboring area.

It is our recommendation based on the situation at Centennial as well as the known number of unsheltered PEH in Anchorage is that if authorized camping is going to occur as a homelessness response that 2-3 authorized camping locations with necessities be provided by the Municipality in a manner that is dispersed throughout the city.

2. Identify the length of time campers will be allowed to remain at any authorized camping location;

The current uncertainty around the length of time Centennial or any encampment will be allowed to remain causes significant disruptions in planning service delivery. Typically, encampments cannot be abated without adequate indoor shelter space available for all encampment occupants.³ At present, there has not been and will not likely be adequate shelter space to clear encampments or to relocate the individuals currently at Centennial.

It is our recommendation that all camps not posing an immediate threat to public health and safety⁴ be allowed to remain with an effort to prioritize intensive outreach services to those encampments to incentivize relocation to an authorized encampment and that all authorized encampments be opened for not less than 90 days with not less than 15 days' notice before closure. We believe this policy decision by the Municipality should result in achieving the Municipality's stated goals of mitigating fire danger and the impact of encampments as well as save the Municipality resources currently spent in the constant notice and abatement cycle when no adequate shelter is available.

² In Anchorage, we know there are over 300 unsheltered PEH living in a variety of encampments and situations in public spaces. We know these include families as well as single adults. We know that the primary unmet needs are safe access to food without cooking fires, access to water due to uncharacteristically hot weather and that basic hygiene needs are not met. Additionally, many PEH in encampments do not have adequate access to refuse containers or storage for personal belongings.

³ In *Martin v. City of Boise*, the court held that "as long as there is no option of sleeping indoors, the government cannot criminalize indigent, homeless people for sleeping outdoors, on public property.

⁴ AMC 15.20.020(b)(15)(b)(i).

3. Provide staffing at authorized camping locations;

Staffing is key to ensuring authorized camping locations operate in a safe manner. Staffing allows for an authorized camping location to have basic rules with enforcement, ensure the mix of campers is safe, coordinate services such as food and be the liaison to other services, such as refuse and hygiene.

It is our recommendation that any authorized camping location allowing over 25 occupants have at least itinerant staffing and any authorized camping location over 50 occupants have 24/7 staffing. This could be done through a single contract with a provider to staff all authorized camping sites. This would allow for consistency among sites as well as clear coordination of services, including the option to assist campers to relocate to a more appropriate site. Additionally, data collection for all sites could be streamlined assisting in the outreach and case management process.

4. Provide meal service at authorized camping locations;

Providing meals at authorized camping locations serves three main objectives. First, meeting the basic needs of PEH; second, providing no cook alternatives for meals during increased fire danger; and third, allowing for more contained food waste management, removing the refuse and food after the meal serving time to reduce trash and bear attractants.

It is our recommendation that any authorized camping location with 50 individuals or more have daily meal service and that arrangements be made for any smaller authorized camping sites to coordinate meal delivery with larger sites. For example, staff or outreach can pick up meals at larger authorized sites for distribution at small sites. We believe that meal service is necessary to protect the public health and safety of the community given the persistent high fire danger and significant bear interactions that have occurred at Centennial and other larger encampments.

5. Provide toilets, hand washing stations and refuse containers with regular pick up and servicing at authorized camping locations;

Sanitation is of the utmost importance. It is our recommendation for any authorized camp site of 25 individuals or larger that portable toilets and hand washing be made available. Additionally, adequate refuse containers with daily emptying. If staffing is provided, they can work with local partners to find adequate shower and laundry solutions. We believe that hygiene services are necessary to protect the public health and safety of the community given the continued high incidence of COVID-19 and significant bear interactions that have occurred at Centennial and other larger encampments around bear attractants, which includes most hygiene items.

6. Provide for storage of personal belongings;

We believe that storage for personal belongings is necessary to protect the public health and safety of the community given the significant bear interactions that have occurred at Centennial and other larger encampments around bear attractants, which often occurs when there is no means to store personal belongings separate from food items and other bear attractants. Also, storage of personal belongings cuts down on litter and trash as well as interpersonal disputes about ownership.

7. Providing a means for safe needle disposal and exchange; and

Used needles and other sharps are dangerous to people and pets if not disposed of safely because they can injure people and spread infections that cause serious health conditions. The safe disposal of used needles prevents re-using and sharing of needles, as well as limits the number of discarded needles in the community. It is our recommendation that means for safe needle disposal be provided in the form of sharps containers available in common areas and for individuals, and for regular exchange of full containers occur. Staff for authorized sites can work with 4As to coordinate procurement of sharps disposal containers and their exchange programs.

8. Accommodations for campers with disabilities.

Many campers at Centennial have significant mobility impairments. This is also true for other unsheltered PEH at other encampments. It is our recommendation that cots be provided for PEH with mobility impairments at authorized encampments. Additionally, that for encampments where known individuals with disabilities are located should also have accessible toilets and handwashing.

We are hopeful that this letter provides a clear road map on action the Municipality can take to ensure if Centennial continues to be used in this manner that it is safe. Outlined are best practices on how to set up authorized camping that serves people experiencing homelessness PEH, as well as specific recommendations on how Anchorage could better mitigate its concerns around homeless encampments during this summer of high fire danger. In closing, let us reiterate, **if substantial progress toward implementing the recommended changes is not made by July 14, 2022, out of deep care for people residing at Centennial, the surrounding community, and service providers, whose safety is of the utmost importance, we feel it necessary to suspend services and supports at Centennial.**

We look forward to hearing from you as soon as possible to collaborate and plan a better way forward. We remain available to problem solve alongside the Municipality. Finally, we acknowledge that the situation remains dynamic and evolving with improvements already having been made and believe that with collaboration we can walk alongside you to make this a better situation for the people residing at Centennial, the surround community and service providers.

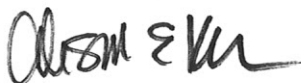
Sincerely,



Meg Zaletel
Executive Director, ACEH



Jessica Parks
Chair, Advisory Council



Alison Kear
Vice Chair, Advisory Council

Cc: Anchorage Assembly Members via Clerk's Office
ACEH Board
Advisory Council
Alaska HUD Office