



CITY OF HOUSTON

Office of the Mayor

Sylvester Turner

Mayor

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Telephone – Dial 311
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February 27, 2018

Blake Robison

Via Email: Blake.T.Robison@gmail.com

Houston, Texas

Dear Mr. Robison,

Thank you for your patience. The issues of homelessness and encampments affect all neighborhoods and all Houstonians. That is exactly why responding to homelessness has been, and will continue to be, a top priority of mine.

My desire to provide for our city's most vulnerable is what prompted me to announce my plan to build on the success of our regional homeless initiative, The Way Home. In March of 2017, I set the goal of placing 500 chronically homeless individuals into permanent supportive housing in just 6 months. Not only did we meet this goal, but surpassed it – housing 548 homeless individuals. As part of The Way Home initiative, the City, County, Federal Government, Houston Coalition for the Homeless, the private sector, philanthropic community and nearly 70 different, local homeless service providers are all working together to implement a single, comprehensive plan. At the crux of our plan is the “housing first” strategy, which breaks the cycle of homelessness by providing permanent housing with an array of tailored supportive services. We can either simply move the problem around, or we can permanently solve the issue by transitioning the homeless from off the streets and into housing. However, the latter (as you can imagine) is complex and not instantaneous. However, we have been able to house over 11,000 homeless individuals since 2012, resulting in a 60% reduction in the overall homeless population since 2011. In fact, over 95% of those housed are still housed today.

However, despite our ability to permanently house thousands of homeless individuals over the past few years, or perhaps because of it, we are now left with individuals on our streets that are the most difficult to house, with debilitating mental health and substance abuse issues, living in encampments that pose public health and safety risks to both the individuals living in the encampments and the surrounding communities. Since April 2017, we have sought alternate locations to serve as low barrier shelters for individuals who refuse housing and instead elect to remain on the streets. As you can imagine, options are few, and we have encountered intense opposition to potential locations. Our homeless population today may be smaller than five years ago, but it is a different population that is more condensed and located in highly visible public spaces.

The public health and safety dangers posed by the encampments in Downtown and Midtown is what prompted me to work with my colleagues in City Council to pass the encampment ordinance prohibiting tents and large amounts of personal items on public property. Subsequently, the City was sued. Prior to the lawsuit and the TRO issued by the federal judge, our collaborative approach involving enhanced homeless outreach, intensive deep cleans and methodical enforcement was working. The number of tents at each of the encampments was going down, trash by the tonnage was removed, and we were on our way toward a possible resolution for both the homeless and surrounding communities. The federal court order impeded our progress and led to the growth of each encampment. That is exactly why we are vigorously fighting the lawsuit so that we may get back to our winning strategy.

Furthermore, we must work together to redirect charitable contributions as you suggested in your letter. The Meaningful Change campaign encourages Houstonians to give, but to redirect from panhandlers (who may or may not be homeless) to organizations that are working to reduce homelessness. One-hundred percent of all donations go directly to helping homeless individuals move off the streets and into permanent housing. This is especially important, given that the federal government reduced the amount of homeless response funding awarded to Houston.

Additionally, we will never be able to fully respond to the issue of homelessness and encampments, if we do not respond to the mental health and substance abuse challenges impacting Houstonians on and off the streets. That is why we advocated for greater State resources in the past legislative session and are working with Harris County on potential solutions to our behavioral health challenges.

Even if our encampments are considered small to those on the West Coast or other major cities across the state and nation, it's still a major issue that we must all work together to address. From cuts in funding to the lingering impact of a hurricane, it won't necessarily be easy, but it can and will be done. We plan to conduct another deep clean at each encampment in the coming weeks while also increasing the presence of HPD patrols. However, while enforcement is an important and helpful tool, it is not the ultimate solution. I am not looking to simply sweep the issue of homelessness in Houston under the rug (or displace an encampment into different neighborhoods). Rather we must work together on permanent solutions to this complex problem.

Thank you for voicing your concerns and for drawing attention to the need for our community to come together. This multi-layered approach to homelessness and encampments will take the effort and commitment of all of us. I have directed my Office for Homeless Initiatives to follow-up and further discuss these pressing issues with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sylvester Turner". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "S" and "T".

Sylvester Turner
Mayor