



Testimony: Clearing Encampments. Oversight Hearing, Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services. Committee on Health and Human Services, February 23, 2016.

My name is John Graham. I am the Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Ward 2 and a member of the Board of Good Faith Communities Coalition.

Homeless individuals living on the street in Washington DC are not a new phenomenon, nor is the search for an appropriate response new. In 1987 Georgetown Ministry Center began its work at Grace Church. 29 years later, they are still in the business of seeking "lasting solutions to homelessness one person at a time." In the past two years *Housing First* has had a significant impact on veterans' homelessness and on chronic homelessness in the city. However, "lasting solutions" for persons who are chronically homeless are still built "one person at a time."

In the past year additional outreach workers have helped our homeless neighbors see a different future. Relationships with outreach workers over time create trust. This trust is critical to preparing chronically homeless persons for housing. Trust allows a person to begin to believe that, no matter their fears, housing can have a positive effect on their life, and that local government can help them find appropriate housing. Importantly, they are not being forced to accept housing. They always have the right to say "no." Building trust requires persistence and presence. It is hard earned and can be easily lost.

Even with due notice, clearing encampments, particularly in hypothermia season, has diminished or destroyed the trust that many had begun to experience with outreach workers. Encampments are communities. In the Hebrew Scriptures, they are holy. Encampments in the Sinai desert formed, settled and moved only in response to a sign from God, not by dint of any human authority: "the cloud covered (the tent of meeting in the midst of the encampment) by day and the appearance of fire by night. And whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel encamped (Numbers 9:16-17)."

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The homeless encampments in DC are undoubtedly dysfunctional in some respects. Acknowledging this truth, though, let us ask ourselves: what gathering of humanity doesn't have its share of dysfunctionality? The encampments in the Sinai desert were riven by conflict, corruption and betrayal; Moses often despaired of his people. Families, churches, city governments, all are subject to these same phenomena. But homeless encampments, like all communities, also offer care, affection, support, even tenderness, such as are rarely experienced by our homeless neighbors. The prospect of leaving them behind creates well-founded anxiety. Trusting relationships are key to making a new start. Clearing encampments sends a message of despair. What I as a homeless person perceive as good, the government can snatch away at any time. Trust is gone. The promise of housing through the good offices of government and its partners is no longer convincing!

Yes, encampments need to be clean. Yes, residents in encampments need to respect their neighbors and the neighborhood. However, we can't lose sight of our goal to find sustainable housing for all our homeless neighbors and to respect and work with those who are not ready for housing and continue to live on the street. The precipitous breakup of encampments, particularly when it undermines fragile, hard-won trust, violates Biblical precepts dating to the Exodus.

Thank you for your attention. As faith communities we continue to pray: "Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten. Nor the hope of the poor be taken away."

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