

To: City Council

From: Debbie Laurie

Date: October 10, 2024

RE: Encampment Closure

Encampments have always existed within the City in some manner, even during times when shelter space and housing resources were more readily available. At the onset of the pandemic, every organization was scrambling to implement social distancing recommendations and find creative ways to keep people safe. Individuals who were unhoused and unsheltered were one of the more vulnerable groups within our communities. To that end, there were two primary initiatives within the City to meet the needs of individuals who were unhoused; a Maine State Housing Authority funded hotel to provide quarantine space and replace the number of shelter beds lost due to social distancing; and a community-based organization's commitment to provide support to unsheltered individuals adjacent to their facility. Individuals who utilized the hotel, were afforded access to housing navigators, peer recovery coaches and support in their transitions from homelessness. Those that remained outside formed a community, often referred to as Camp Hope, and were not able to access similar service levels.

The statewide homeless response system is inundated with challenges: the services are underfunded, many operate in silos, the system utilizes an inadequate data system, and has limited housing assistance and supportive resources available. The State is working to address these issues by providing additional funding to shelters, bolstering housing first initiatives, and coordinating access to supportive services but these efforts take time. During COVID and post-pandemic, the housing market changed dramatically, wait times to access medical and social service care skyrocketed, and the delay in all of these resources has resulted in a population that is less healthy.

In 2022, the circumstances were such that the City was able to access technical assistance from the Department of Housing Urban Development to resolve encampments. That work involved convening all community stakeholders, level-setting work, and coalescing around a community goal for the betterment of all. It was a great opportunity to rekindle community relationships and enhance collaborative efforts. That effort also resulted in additional technical assistance related to homeless services within a number of State agencies. Since the closure of the encampment along Valley Avenue in April 2023, there has continued to be a presence and desire to retool that level of effort behind the Hope House. With fewer participating organizations, less available housing assistance, increased acuity level of health needs, and the ebb and flow of individuals within this location, it has been difficult.

For the last several months the City of Bangor has worked with staff providing services to encampment residents toward prioritizing the homeless encampment in the vicinity of Cleveland Street and Texas Avenue for resolution with a target closure date of December 31,

2024. The City intends to proceed in partnership with service providers and stakeholders using best practices and with as much support for encampment residents as current resource availability will allow.

When approaching this decision, the City considered many factors that impact the wellbeing of residents of the encampment and the community as a whole. The presence of known drug trafficking, activity that increases the risks of public health concerns, and an alarming increase in illegal activity particularly related to allegations of violence among encampment residents are all contributing factors to the City's decision to see it closed and residents connected to new opportunities for stable, permanent housing.

The process of resolving the encampment will rely upon our ability to connect encampment residents with housing and supportive services while mitigating the need for criminalization of activities related to homelessness. We are working to account for storage of personal belongings, how to support people who are unsheltered with pets, and how to ensure every housing resource available is accounted for and accessed. We will be guided by the incredible work already being done by outreach workers and direct service providers and will leverage a cross-agency, multi-sectoral effort to utilize every resource possible as we assist residents in seeking housing through a dignified process. As winter approaches, we anticipate colder weather will create an additional incentive for folks to move inside and we will continue to dedicate resources to connect individuals to permanent housing once the encampment has been closed.

The resolution effort has been designed with best practices in mind using the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness's 19 Strategies for Communities to Address Encampments Humanely and Effectively and seeks to connect as many encampment residents with supportive services and housing as possible. We recognize the closure will be disruptive to the lives of those living in the encampment and we intend to offer clear communication and expectations to residents and partners as we move forward.

Safety and Security of Encampment Residents & Bangor Community Members

- The high utilization of injectable drugs within the encampment coupled with the presence of numerous discarded and uncapped needles exposes all residents and providers working in that space to communicable diseases and raises the potential for public health concerns.
- The encampment abuts the University of Maine at Augusta campus, a daycare facility, and healthcare offices and has been a consistent concern for student, employee, and visitor safety, the rise in violent crime in this space has increased the concern of spillover incidents on surrounding properties.
- Between 1/1/24 and 9/30/24 there have been 501 calls to the Bangor Police Department from or regarding the encampment location. Of the total number, there have been 30 calls to the location that pose a serious threat to a person's wellbeing including calls related to

sex offender activity, weapons, overdoses, and assaults. During this time, BPD's Special Response Team has been activated three times.

- The lack of willingness on the part of encampment residents to engage with the Bangor Police Department to report and deter violent crime has ensured much of the violence against encampment residents and their belongings continues to go unreported.
- The recent exposure of illicit drug use and sales within the encampment not only puts encampment residents at risk but it severely limits the ability of folks in that space to engage with outreach workers to seek any available housing options.

Of the current, known 73 encampment residents, there are 22 individuals who are regularly engaged with outreach services, 31 individuals who are at least partially engaged with outreach services, and 20 individuals who are not at all engaged with outreach services. Regular engagement means an individual consistently makes their appointments for housing applications, rental viewings, court proceedings, and treatments and checks in with outreach multiple times throughout the week. Partial engagement most frequently includes engaging with outreach staff to secure rides to appointments but does not consistently check in with outreach services and misses check ins related to housing opportunities.

It is important to remain cognizant of the reality that the path to stable, permanent housing for someone who has experienced unsheltered homelessness, particularly within an encampment, is not always linear. Engagement levels are fluid and change based on any and all external and/or internal barriers an individual may be experiencing. Relationships between individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness and the supportive agencies providing assistance are paramount and the City wishes to protect and lift up those connections to ensure the work moves forward with compassion and dignity.

The opening of warming shelters across the City will present a new opportunity to incentivize people who are currently living in the encampment to seek accommodation indoors. These venues are no substitute for stable, permanent housing; however, with appropriate and routine resource application in the form of outreach services, connections to tertiary services, and housing navigation, we anticipate that the controlled environment offered within Bangor's warming centers will provide more folks with opportunity to consider their opportunities to move beyond an unsheltered life. With the earliest opening date scheduled for November 1 and the latest closing date of April 15, the centers will provide suitable overlap to the scheduled resolution of the encampment taking place at the end of the year. Of the four warming shelters available to people who are unhoused in Bangor, two will facilitate a day shelter and two will offer spaces for overnight accommodation. It is imperative that we remember these are not traditional shelter beds and do not facilitate a stable residence for shelter guests; resources must be made available and all appropriate connections to permanent housing must be sought.

We will continue evaluating all potential solutions to facilitate greater access to stable, permanent, and supportive housing. We anticipate the opening of 41 units of permanent

supportive housing by the end of the year and while this will not solve for access to housing for all encampment residents, there will be movement of both unsheltered and sheltered individuals into those units, freeing up spaces in emergency shelters and transitional housing units.

The City recognizes that this work cannot be insular, and must be done through the coordinated and committed efforts of partners already working to support people who are unsheltered. We invite stakeholders, providers, and new potential partners to reach out via encampment@bangormaine.gov to engage in this work with us. This process will be adaptive and responsive to both the needs of the individuals we seek to help and to the capacity of the partners we're fortunate to work with. We welcome creative, holistic solutions as we know this pivotal work has great power to positively change the lives of some of our most vulnerable community members.