

City plans crackdown on camping by homeless

Enforcement will grow with opening of shelter

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Pallet's prefabricated shelters are assembled at Alexandria Park Tiny Home Village along the 170 Freeway in North Hollywood in 2021. Torrance expects to open its 40-unit tiny home shelter in June.

Torrance's 40-unit temporary housing shelter officially has an expected opening date — June 26 — and with it will come more stringent enforcement of the city's anti-camping rules, officials said this week.

As site construction for the Pallet shelter community nears completion, city officials and the Police Department are working to finalize on-site security measures and future police response to homelessness throughout Torrance at large.

Police Chief Jeremiah Hart announced at this week's City Council meeting that the Police Department will enforce Torrance's anti-camping ordinance once the Pallet tiny homes are open. The anti-camping ordinance outlaws sleeping on public streets and sidewalks.

“Our experience is that we have people who are saying they're open to services, and we have people who are resistant to services,” Hart said. “When the Pallet shelter is open, the anti-camping ordinance will be enforced by the Police Department (on) those people who are service resistant.”

But People Assisting the Homeless, or PATH, an organization that has helped place 9,000 people into permanent housing since its establishment in 1983, said anti-camping laws don't target the root issues that lead to homelessness.

“PATH has seen that enforcement rarely ends a person's episode of homelessness,” PATH spokesperson Tyler Renner said in an email Wednesday. “Our approach to outreach is person-centered, trauma-informed and relies on building trust.

“Ultimately, any successful outreach or enforcement efforts,” Renner added, “must be connected to robust resources and lead to long-term housing.”

A 2018 landmark federal court decision in *Martin v. Boise* ruled that cities could not legally enforce anticamping ordinances without first providing shelter for their unhoused populations — citing the Constitution's Eighth Amendment guarantee of protection from cruel and unusual punishment.

Torrance's tiny home program fulfills that legal duty to provide some sort of shelter to the unhoused, according to Hart, meaning the city will fall within its rights to enforce the ordinance.

Police officers will be directed to offer a spot in the temporary housing program to any homeless individuals they encountered during service calls, Hart said.

If a person who is homeless repeatedly refuses to accept services or a place in the program, Hart said, they will be issued a citation or arrested, depending on the situation.

“It's important as the chief of police to let everyone know that the direction I've been giving staff is that we will follow constitutional policing,” Hart said, “which guarantees the rights of all people — the city of Torrance residents who live in homes and also the people on our streets.”

One question that remains, however, is what the city will do if the new shelter, in a parking lot behind the courthouse at the Torrance Civic Center, is at capacity.

The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority's 2020 homeless count survey reported 332 unhoused individuals in Torrance alone — a 106 person increase from the previous year. While LAHSA's latest homeless count data won't be released until July, some members of the City Council said they believe the numbers have likely increased in the past two years.

“That's one of the big concerns that I have about this program,” Councilman Mike Griffiths said. “The fact that our shelter is relatively small in comparison to the unhoused that we know to be in our community — I'm very concerned that we're just going to be back to square one.”

Anti-camping enforcement will be determined essentially on a case-by-case basis, Hart said during the Tuesday council meeting, depending on bed availability at the shelter. Legally, the Police Department cannot cite or arrest the unhoused for camping if there are no tiny homes available.

“The cycle for the Police Department will be to continue to identify people in the city who are homeless and offering them services,” he said, “but there will be no enforcement of the anti-camping ordinance if there isn't an available bed.”

The tiny home program is designed to be temporary, and will be stocked with supportive services to help transition people who are homeless into permanent housing, according to Deputy City Manager Viet Hoang.

“Our hope is that someone can transition from homelessness to permanent housing in the three to six month time frame,” Hoang said, noting that there are various factors that impact that time frame.

“Homelessness is as unique as the individual,” Hoang added. “Some people will need more help than others.

The second challenge, Hoang said, is the actual availability of housing in the area.

Torrance's programs will focus on transitioning its clients to three types of permanent housing, Hoang said: Reunification with family, permanent supportive housing (with long-term supportive services), and housing subsidies (which could include a housing voucher to help cover monthly rent).

On-site coordinators, who will know the individual's situation and the resources available to them, will create and manage the housing plans. Harbor Interfaith Services, a San Pedro nonprofit, was officially awarded a contract to operate the site on Tuesday. The organization will hire a program manager, two intake coordinators/case managers and five resident aides to operate the program on a 24/7 basis.

Those employees will also help program residents access services necessary to prepare them for permanent housing, including for mental health treatment.

Some of those services are:

- L.A. County Department of Health Services will provide ongoing COVID-19 testing and vaccines; the Venice Family Clinic will provide baseline health care services.
- L.A. County Department of Public Social Services will assist with enrollment in financial aid and food stamp benefits.
- Volunteers from faithbased organizations will help secure hygiene items and organize social events for residents.

- SouthBay Workforce Investment Board will provide life skills, work preparedness and job search training.

Harbor Interfaith will also hire two 24/7 on-site security guards via the private security company Black Knight Patrol, officials said at Tuesday's meeting. They'll be responsible for enforcing all site and program rules, including a nightly curfew.

Besides enforcing the anti-camping ordinance where possible, Hart said, the Police Department will increase its foot patrols near the Civic Center and potentially use drone technology to monitor the site from above to discourage loitering nearby.

Torrance also is looking into higher-security fencing for the surrounding perimeter of the site, officials said.

“I'm tired of hearing the criticism about this because I think this is a system that will work,” Mayor Pat Furey said. “How about giving it a little chance? We've done the research, our staff has done the research, they've reached out to other agencies that do a similar program — and those seem to be working.”

Torrance's program will be on a probationary period for the first year. Staffers will provide updates to the City Council to determine its long-term viability moving forward.