

ACLU releases report detailing 'shortcomings' of Operation Rio Grande

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October 16, 2018

ABC4

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SALT LAKE CITY (News4Utah) – The American Civil Liberties Union of Utah released a scathing report detailing what it calls “the real” cost of Operation Rio Grande. According to the report, the effort to rid downtown Salt Lake City of crime, drugs, and homelessness netted more than 5,000 arrests in 2017. However, more than 75 percent of those rounded up by police during the Operation were arrested for

misdemeanors or active warrants.

Activists point out that when the Operation was launched, the effort was designed to target the area’s worse criminals.

The report goes on to note that fewer than 250 new beds were added to deal with drug treatment options since the start of the operation.

"Operation Rio Grande has done some good, but it's missed its mark," said Jason Stevenson with ACLU of Utah.

"There's been too much reliance on law enforcement, criminal justice, and the revolving door of jail, and not enough focus on treating the underlying social issues," added Stevenson.

While officials said Operation Rio Grande is a success due to a decline in crime stats in the area and crime decreased more than 20 percent during the first year of the Operation, the ACLU argues officials often “improperly conflate issues of homelessness and crime.”

The ACLU goes on to say there is still time to make changes and the leaders of Operation Rio Grande can "restructure its priorities and redirect its resources to target the underlying causes of homelessness."

News4Utah spoke with Nate McDonald at Department of Workforce Services.

"The lawlessness, the violence, the drug activity that was occurring in the Rio Grande area had gotten so bad," said McDonald.

"The county has been so critical in supporting this with a drug court program, with sober living housing opportunities, we've been able to do so much," he added.

He says Operation Rio Grande needed a heavy law enforcement presence at first.

"It was out of control -- something had to be done."

Read the full report: Calculating the Real Cost of Operation Rio Grande

The report was released ahead of a panel discussion on Operation Rio Grande scheduled for Thursday at Centro Civico Mexicano. The discussion will feature law enforcement, treatment experts, social workers, and criminal defense attorneys.

Panelists will include:

- Matt Melville, Director of Homeless Services at Catholic Community Services of Utah
- Kate Conyers, former public defender and current private defense attorney at Conyers & Nix
- Rachel Santizo, Recovery Outreach Specialist from Odyssey House
- Josh Scharman, Deputy Chief of the SLC Police Department

