

In our opinion: Operation Rio Grande is not an either-or program

Deseret News editorial board

Published: October 29, 2018 6:00 am

<https://www.deseretnews.com/article/900038998/in-our-opinion-operation-rio-grande-is-not-an-either-or-program.html>



Scott G Winterton, Deseret News

The ACLU presents valid concerns about what it sees as a “heavy-handed” approach to the problem. There is an imbalance in the program since there have been 13 arrests for every person placed in a treatment program. But there’s another side to the story.

A little more than a year since the inception of Operation Rio Grande, conflicting perspectives contend whether the program is making adequate progress in addressing homelessness and related crime problems. The points of view that seem to be at odds are reconciled when the program is viewed, as it should be, as a holistic approach and not exclusively intended as either a law enforcement initiative or a social services campaign.

The American Civil Liberties Union has criticized the effort as one too focused on the law enforcement end, resulting in more than 5,000 separate arrests over its 14-month span. Conversely, there is impressive evidence of success in helping significant numbers of people once homeless turn their lives around, as demonstrated by the case of a woman reported in

this paper who has overcome drug addiction and found stable employment in Salt Lake County government.

The ACLU presents valid concerns about what it sees as a “heavy-handed” approach to the problem. There is an imbalance in the program since there have been 13 arrests for every person placed in a treatment program. But there’s another side to the story. Close to 150 people formerly homeless as a result of substance abuse are participating in a program emphasizing rehabilitation through drug court and other programs. So far, more than two-thirds of the participants have stuck with the program, described as “grueling” by the judge in charge.

Incrementally addressing the problem one individual at a time is laborious and resource-demanding, but it is the only practical approach if the county is serious about abating the problem in a humane way. As a result, it’s important that funding remains sufficient to expand the number of treatment beds and shelter services.

" Incrementally addressing the problem one individual at a time is laborious and resource-demanding, but it is the only practical approach if the county is serious about abating the problem in a humane way. "

The law enforcement component is vital as well. The operation grew out of years of frustration over the inability to put a dent in crime problems associated with the location of homeless service facilities in the Rio Grande neighborhood. Rampant drug-dealing and aggressive panhandling created high tension in an area undergoing gentrification and becoming a vital residential, retail and entertainment hub. A year after the operation commenced, the problems have by no means been eradicated, but there is noticeable improvement.

Compassion for those living on the streets is not compromised by paying honest attention to the fact that homelessness can lead to public safety problems. Sadly, a portion of the homeless population will remain more prone to criminal activity than having a sincere commitment to rehabilitation. For years, many in that situation found themselves circling through the revolving doors of arrest and release back to the streets. Now, there is an infrastructure in place that at least offers and encourages an alternative.

Operation Rio Grande should not be judged at this point as an either-or proposition in which progress is measured by the number of successful outcomes in rehabilitation programs versus the number of criminal prosecutions. The problem is complex and nuanced. The concentrated and multifaceted campaign that has arisen in response to problems in the Rio Grande and beyond is a viable, valuable and necessary campaign that remains a work in progress.