

Advocacy Organization Urges Salt Lake City Mayor To Let Homeless Camps Stay Open During Pandemic

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Audio:

Salt Lake City's plan to address homelessness includes cleaning up camps, connecting people with resources and eventually shutting the encampments down completely. A national advocacy organization has asked Mayor Erin Mendenhall to leave the camps open unless there's adequate housing available.

The National Homelessness Law Center [sent a letter](#) Friday asking Salt Lake City Mayor Erin Mendenhall to leave homeless camps in place as the coronavirus pandemic continues into winter.

Mendenhall recently announced [a plan to address homelessness](#). The first part includes cleaning up campsites. The second involves connecting people with social services before closing down encampments altogether.

Some community members have [protested the cleanups](#) over the past few weeks, and at a recent Salt Lake City Council meeting, dozens of people opposed the mayor's plan.

But Mendenhall said they're not the only ones with an opinion.

"That is pretty heavily outweighed by other voices that we're hearing," Mendenhall said. "From residents themselves, from community councils and from businesses across the city who aren't feeling safe."

The cleanups have begun, but the camp closures haven't started yet.

Eric Tars, the legal director for the National Homelessness Law Center, opposes closures unless there are other good options for housing. Tars said the CDC recommends pausing camp evictions to stop the spread of COVID-19, though he said that doesn't mean they want encampments to be a permanent fixture on Salt Lake streets.

"It's not a healthy place for anybody," Tars said. "But it is healthier than any of the alternatives that the city is currently making available."

While the CDC's recommendations are just guidelines, Tars cited a decision by the 9th Circuit Court, which ruled that cities can't close camps or enforce no-camping laws unless there's



adequate shelter available. The case was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, [which declined to hear it](#) — meaning the 9th Circuit Court ruling stands. Utah, though, is under the jurisdiction of the 10th Circuit.

Tars noted that Salt Lake City's homeless population outnumbers its available shelter space. "Unless the city can demonstrate that it's making those adequate alternatives available, it is definitely leaving itself open to potential litigation," he said.

Jason Stevenson, communications manager for the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah, said while it's good the city isn't closing camps right now, the organization will be keeping an eye on the next phase of the plan.

"The thing that we're going to be paying very close attention to is the use of law enforcement in any type of operations to close camps or to deprive people of their property," Stevenson said.

In addition to his letter to Mendenhall, Tars said he sent the same message to Utah Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox.

Tars recommended using individual hotel rooms to house people this winter, rather than crowding into emergency shelters.

He also said he doesn't take issue with the cleanups, as long as they don't result in the displacement of people experiencing homelessness.