

ACLU says Operation Rio Grande should not be a model for solving homelessness

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SALT LAKE CITY (KUTV) — In a critical report called “Endgame for Operation Rio Grande,” the ACLU said the effort to rid Salt Lake’s Rio Grande area of drugs, crime, and homelessness, created damage that will last for many years.

The main problem, according to the report, was letting police lead the effort by arresting people.



“We never saw law enforcement and the criminal justice system as an effective way to deal with the underlying social issues like homelessness, drug abuse and mental health issues,” said Jason Stevenson, communications director with the ACLU of Utah.

In a critical report called “Endgame for Operation Rio Grande,” the ACLU said the effort to rid Salt Lake’s Rio Grande area of drugs, crime, and homelessness, created damage that will last for many years. (Photo: KUTV FILE)

The reports says most of the arrests during ORG were for non-violent, misdemeanor crimes like possession of drugs, trespassing and littering.

Many people were arrested multiple times, only to be released because the jail could not accommodate the surge of arrests. And although phases two and three of ORG focused on getting people housing and drug treatment — and many people did receive life-changing help — the reports says those same people were left to untangle the mess created by their criminal records.

“Those arrests, those fines, those warrants can prevent them from rebuilding their lives,” Stevenson said.

Stevenson said Operation Rio Grande should not become the model for dealing with homelessness in Utah or anywhere else.

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Nate McDonald, communication director for the Utah Department of Workforce Services, said it's important for the public to remember what Rio Grande Street looked like before ORG.

"There was definitely a situation where public safety and order needed to be restored in that area. There was a lot of lawlessness, criminal activity, drug dealing," he said.

McDonald said it was important to start the operation with police officers (from various agencies) enforcing the law.

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He said ORG followed up with things like drug treatment, drug court, placing people in sober living homes. To this day, the operation continues to offer expungement events where people can go through the process of clearing their records.

He said now, the effort to help people out of homelessness and drug addiction has moved to the three, brand-new homeless resource centers. The third center will open in mid-to-late November.

