

## **New ACLU report examines ‘long-term damage’ of Operation Rio Grande**

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As they adapt to a massive shift in homeless services throughout the region, members of Salt Lake City’s unsheltered population will also be coping with the “long-term damage” inflicted by Operation Rio Grande, according to a new analysis released Monday by the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah.

The 10-page report criticizes the two-year law enforcement campaign, which focused on Salt Lake City’s Rio Grande neighborhood near the emergency shelter downtown, for an “over-reliance on arrests and fines” that it said has placed a “substantial, long-term burden” not only on people experiencing homelessness but also on local service providers and the community at large.

“Even though the law enforcement focus of [Operation Rio Grande] is winding down, we believe its aftershocks will continue to shape efforts to address the social issues involving homelessness in Salt Lake City,” the report states. “That’s because the impact of arrests and fines do not easily vanish from people’s list of troubles — especially those with limited resources — but reverberate, often derailing their efforts to rebuild their lives.”

When Operation Rio Grande launched in August 2017, its architects said they planned to target the “worst of the worst” for arrest and would expand treatment options and job training for others.

Instead, the report states, many homeless people were cited and arrested for low-level offenses, like camping, jaywalking and open-container violations. And they then became “caught in a revolving door of the criminal justice system without the offramps to treatment options provided to people charged with more serious crimes.”

That’s no small thing, since nonviolent misdemeanors, if ignored, can lead to arrest warrants that serve as barriers to accessing services and housing and to landing jobs — the very things that help people exit homelessness.

“It might not have been their intention to arrest their way out of this problem, but it became the reality of what Operation Rio Grande was,” said Jason Stevenson, spokesman for the ACLU of Utah.

The same policing tactics in a different part of the city, he said, likely would’ve provoked an outcry: “That this is not American, that we don’t want a police state, that we don’t want law enforcement on every street corner watching what we’re doing.”

Nate McDonald, a spokesman for the Utah Department of Workforce Services, which is helping guide the transition to a new system for delivering homeless services, said the report raises some “valid concerns” but argues it doesn’t paint a full picture of the operation.

“The intent and purpose of Operation Rio Grande was to restore public order and safety in that area,” he said, “so that people who are experiencing homelessness would have a safe place, would feel safe to come and obtain the services that were in that area and increase the opportunities to get treatment and also housing services and employment services.”

The operation’s first phase was focused on public safety, McDonald said, while its second and third phases aimed to help people access mental-health services, recover from addiction and find jobs.

Any long-term effects as a result of the law enforcement campaign, he said, are part of “the complicated nature of addressing homelessness.”

A spokeswoman with the Salt Lake City Police Department said she agrees that law enforcement should never be the “tip of the spear” in tackling mental health issues or substance abuse. But society hasn’t done a good job of building alternative pathways for reaching individuals in need of services, said Christina Judd, department spokeswoman. “We’ve been stuck in this pattern where local law enforcement continues to be this Swiss Army knife of social reform,” Judd said.

At the same time, the department has hired social workers to give these individuals a “warm handoff” to the substance abuse or mental health treatment, rather than putting them into jail, she said.

The ACLU report reflecting on Operation Rio Grande comes amid a transition to a new model for homeless services in and around Salt Lake City. Providers plan to close The Road Home’s downtown emergency shelter in the Rio Grande neighborhood before year’s end and are shifting clients into three smaller resource centers.

Amid concerns about the lack of adequate capacity within these resource centers, the ACLU advocates for a discussion around how the new spaces and their policies “impact the rights and dignity of people experiencing homelessness.”

“Beyond a bed and a meal,” the report argues, “people also need an environment focused on protecting and promoting their privacy, civil rights, dignity and self-determination.”

The organization says policy decisions should come with considerable input from people experiencing homelessness, who are best positioned to offer a sense of how the community will be affected.

Ahead of the opening of the first of three new resource centers, The Salt Lake Tribune found members of the homeless community didn’t know much about the move — a strategic decision made by the transition team as it focused on getting people into housing because they didn’t want people to see the shelters as a destination.

McDonald said the service providers at the new homeless resource centers have been facilitating input from people experiencing homelessness during the transition and said they plan to ramp up those efforts in the future.

“Could we do more? Definitely,” he said, “and I think that’s something we recognize.”

The ACLU also recommends the creation of a Homeless Bill of Rights within the centers — a “visible reminder that everyone is equal under the law” and a way to ensure vulnerable and marginalized communities are protected.

Some of the guidelines the organization says could be included are protection from harassment or intimidation in spaces where people have a right to be, a right to privacy for personal property and the right to equal treatment and protection from discrimination based on their housing status.

“A Homeless Bill of Rights can facilitate future discussions on issues that arose during [Operation Rio Grande] and continue at the new homeless resource centers,” the report states. “If we want to provide meaningful help to people experiencing homelessness, we need to respect their dignity and make their voice and rights central in every interaction and decision.” Moving forward, the ACLU’s Stevenson said his organization hopes the mistakes of Operation Rio Grande won’t be repeated under the new service model.

“We hope that our report will bring to light some of the lessons from Operation Rio Grande so we don’t forget them in Salt Lake City or Utah,” he said. “We’ve learned that law enforcement as a leading edge is not the best way to address these social issues.”

Editor’s note • Any person in need of shelter or a resource center should call Utah Community Action’s Homeless Services Line at 801-990-9999.

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