

## Utah ACLU critical of homeless operation in latest report

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SALT LAKE CITY, Utah — Over two years after its launch, the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah (ACLU) says an expansive homelessness project has created more problems than it's solved.



In their latest report, titled “Endgame for Operation Rio Grande,” the organization argues the public safety plan relied too heavily on criminal justice tools.

Communications Manager Jason Stevenson says the name alone indicates a misguided approach.

“It sounds like it’s the invasion of Normandy almost,” he says.

Stevenson admits that a law enforcement element was necessary, but he says that, too often, it was the first recourse in the operation instead of being a last resort.

“It ends up creating more problems when you involve the criminal justice system as the primary filter,” he explains.

Utah ACLU: Undue burden on homeless

The report highlighted petty crimes such as jaywalking and camping were routinely addressed, something which, in the Utah ACLU’s opinion, placed an undue burden on the homeless population.

“The better way to do it is to deliver the services without having to arrest someone first,” says Stevenson.

He says if a homeless person is being stopped and charged for misdemeanors, all it does is create a revolving door in the court system and constructs more hurdles for that person to be rehabilitated.

“We feel that they were not helped as much as was promised and in fact have been burdened with more arrests, warrants [and] fines, making it much harder for them to rebuild their lives,” explains Stevenson.

Crime rates are down says Utah ACLU, but will that last?

Numbers from their report show crime rates have dropped significantly in the Rio Grande area since the start of the operation, but it remains to be seen if that trend can continue once persistent law enforcement presence ends.

While some of the people who spearheaded the operation have fired back at the Utah ACLU, saying their claims and critiques are off the mark.

Former House Speaker Greg Hughes says the ACLU’s data is bad and refutes claims that the criminal justice system was overwhelmed by the sheer number of arrests.

“All the things that we have done, I think it’s outpacing the challenges that you’re seeing across this country,” he explains.

He adds the majority of people arrested were never actually booked into jail and there are more people getting treatment in Salt Lake City than any other city.

Beginning of the end

Operation Rio Grande cost around \$67 million and is in the process of winding down.

Law enforcement will still patrol the Rio Grande area through the Spring of 2020 as a transition to a new homeless system takes place.

Former Lawmakers fire back at ACLU

People who spearheaded Operation Rio Grande when it first began aren’t taking the ACLU’s criticism lying down. One former lawmaker says the ACLU is twisting data to raise funds.

Former House Speaker Greg Hughes took charge of ORG when it first launched. He refutes the claims that the high number of arrests actually “overburdened” the criminal justice system. He says there were restrictions on how many of the arrests could be booked into the Salt Lake County Jail, so people were only booked if they were accused of violent crimes

“You could sell drugs, use drugs or anything in between in front of law enforcement,” Hughes says and still not be booked into jail.

Hughes also says the efforts made by the state and Salt Lake County are outpacing the efforts being taken in other cities to help the homeless.

“I’d like to know, where in any part of America, right now, you’re seeing more drug courts, more expungements and people getting more treatment beds,” Hughes says.

In the end, Hughes believes the ACLU's report is really all about one thing... money.

He says, "I just think this is the sabre rattling that we've seen from the ACLU in the past. Their data is bad and the way they twist the information is meant to raise funds."

(Contributing: Paul Nelson)