

**From:** [Markis Dee](#)  
**To:** [Cathy Halka](#)  
**Subject:** Camp Cleanup Compliance  
**Date:** Monday, August 24, 2020 6:25:00 PM

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Hi Cathy , I would like to please ask you to submit this 2 comments for the official record at the homeless colleges workgroup.

Thank you for all that you do.

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\*\*\*Remember, we are under a Pandemic EMERGENCY\*\*\*

Greetings esteemed colleagues. I am writing in this forum to make a matter of public record, the investigation I have been conducting as homeless advocate on this workgroup.

First I feel the need to disclaim, in a town this size many of us wear many different hats as we try to make things better for the whole.

It is in that spirit that I make this disclaimer now;

I am the vice chair for Homes Now, Not Later, and the Program Director there as well. I am also the Homeless Advocate for Whatcom county, put there by a unanimous vote by the Whatcom county council. The hat as homeless advocate is the hat I am wearing as I speak to you now.

I want to make it very clear that my role with HomesNow is one of being strictly solution based and as a shelter provider in Whatcom County.

In no way should my efforts to uncover uncomfortable truths regarding homelessness in Whatcom county be construed as the activities or opinions of Homes Now Not Later and/or its board members.

During my tenure as Homeless Advocate since July of 2019 I have engaged the many participants in the Homeless Strategies Workgroup , and I applaud their attention and efforts to alleviating homelessness in our community. While it has its drawbacks in some of its efficacy, I see great benefit in communicating in real time with each other.

Certainly communication is going to be the key to providing quality service in this arena.

In my role as advocate I have an inordinate amount of direct contact with the houseless population.

I know them, they know me.

In our conversations many of them came to me with a rather consistent story of police taking all of their belongings , or trashing them during the process of what the COB and BPD currently call “camp clean ups”. I reported these issues to the HSW as they arose and as the problem seemed to be continuing, I decided to ask for permission to go out and observe with the BPD as they went out to perform these duties, with the intent of either confirming or dispelling these reports. I was very happy to receive a positive invitation from the BPD to attend, but as my role is an unpaid position, other things in my life came up, which prevented me from pursuing it at the time.

Well, life got busy all winter, and I was certainly attending other homeless needs all winter , as well as my personal issues.

Fast forward to the March 30th HSW meeting which was our first meeting to take place after the workgroup was on a hiatus through the beginning of the Corona virus pandemic.

It was in that meeting that Ann Deacon of the Whatcom County Health Department made a recommendation based on the CDC’s recommendation that campers be left in place, as they were seen as being among the safest homeless individuals, already practicing distancing and not in a congregate setting.

I raised my voice at that time, making the ask of the BPD to heed these recommendations.

I was gratified that Deputy Chief Flo Simon of the Bellingham Police Department spoke up in

response and gave assurances that they would indeed comply with these national and county recommendations. I was heartened that the BPD seemed to be on top of this and had already gotten started with an emergency policy.

Fast forward again, six weeks later my attention was drawn to camp clean ups resuming. A look at the police blotter verified this. I made note of this, and made some noise on Facebook about it, and in my next Homes Now Not Later meeting (a weekly event) with Chief David Doll and Bellingham City Planner Rick Sepler, Chief Doll looked into the camera on Zoom and said, "Let me make this perfectly clear to you Markis, if someone is camped out in one of our parks, they will be moved along immediately. We have zero tolerance for campers in our parks, and camping is not allowed.

Furthermore, our current policy on clean ups is to leave campers where they are unless there is an egregious health issue noted, like;

- Needles
- Human Waste, or
- Excessive Garbage and filth" (Chief Doll would , at a later date , come to amend this verbal policy by adding a fourth component which might also qualify a camp for clean up and this is a "public safety issue")

It was at this time I made outreach to the Bellingham police department asking if I might have a chance to observe clean ups under this pandemic emergency. I was concerned at the limited capacity of our sheltering and resources in Whatcom County at the time.

Of note; this was also a time when many shop keepers had shuttered their businesses and left many of our homeless without ability to use their services. (our parks also hindered) This placed our unhoused citizens in much worse conditions than they were used to in our streets.

Again, I found the BPD to be quite cooperative and forthcoming , and through Officer Dave Crass ,and we booked a date for June 3rd.

We met in the morning in the BPD parking lot where we talked over our assignments of the day. The officers were regarding packets of paper with their orders for the day on them, and were coordinating with the independent clean up crew for routing and planning.

In attendance were two "security" officers (this is an important distinction. These are not enforcement officers, according to Chief Doll, but instead are considered to be security for the independent contracted clean up crew. I am not sure why the distinction needs to be made, I am sure it was for legal reasons of some sort), and also, my personally assigned liaison officer at the time Lieutenant John Knutson.

I was really not sure at the time exactly who did what in the field, and was very happy to have the officers respond to my questions openly and informally. There was a general agreement among all of us that transparency is what was important here, and I genuinely felt that.

I was full of questions and certainly knew that I was missing a lot as I was not trying to slow down the security officers in their duties at all, leaving Officer Knutson and I occasionally lagging behind, but always catching up so I could observe what I wanted to observe, enjoying a friendly banter among all three officers.

It was a lot to grok, and as I said, I left a lot behind to be answered later.

In the spirit of expediency in this very confusing and convoluted issue , I'm going to now dictate what I came to believe was the entirety of the policy of the BPD as of June 3rd.

I was led to believe that while the BPD was obeying their own moratorium and no camps were being cleaned up, that when they did indeed resume, that they were specifically going back on a back log of all camps which had been reported during the moratorium. It is also notable that I established early on with all three officers that none of them had heard about any policy regarding CDC nor Whatcom County health Department recommendations.

In fact, they had no idea there had been any change in policy whatsoever.

This includes my liaison officer, John Knutson.

Again as of June 3rd my impression was; citizens call to complain about a camp for whatever reason a citizen might call, the police then direct that information to the Opportunity Council's homeless outreach team. The Homeless Outreach Team then goes out in the field and establishes contact with the camp. (I have later been told by Terry Bryant of Opportunity Council that they make contact, assess needs, try to direct people toward services, and let them know that they are in an illegal site and might expect to hear from the police. Also Terry said that if no one is present the Homeless Outreach Team tags the camp for clean up).

The next contact with the citizen is made by the clean up crew which I was attending, (usually minus my liaison officer and myself.)

They carry with them orders to tag individual camp sites with ariel photography and brightly highlighted locations for clarity.

At this time, it was unsure exactly who was out in the field making the decision on whether a camp should get cleaned up. I had presumed it was Enforcement Officer Claudia Viscarra.

Notification happens at the same time as they go through the encampments, previously notified, and give them 15 minutes to get out.

It is usually a friendly interaction generally... A little too friendly in some aspects I suppose.

By that I mean the relationship is very servile and deferent from the homeless citizens point of view, and they are clearly just trying not to get involved in a legal issue with the BPD.

The smiling officers don't seem to realize the power they hold in this relationship. (Perhaps a good time to point out that the officers are not wearing their masks during these interactions).

Officers often tell campers that they can have a little bit longer if they are actively moving their stuff, but that seems to be the extent of the courtesy that the officers seem willing to give at this time.

There is no alternative shelter proffered to the citizens as they are asked to move, and when a camper asks, "Where should I go?" the answer is usually in the form of a repeated order. In some cases that order is to completely vacate an entire block. If that individual should ask again, the officer responds with the same reply.

The officers attend the scene as long as the camper is present.

The deference afforded to the officers is astounding, and disconcerting, in light of such displacement, often in the rain.

When the camper has vacated the site, everything they leave behind is assessed for valuables by independent contractors.

From the word of the officers, valuables include items like bicycles, wallets, watches, and like hard items, while most cloth items, especially when wet, are considered garbage. I did not see any cloth items get saved. In fact, I ONLY saw a bicycle get saved. But I roll with the officers, so I don't witness the entirety of the clean up.

I expressed to my liaison officer that a couple of the items I was specifically looking for were fecal waste and needles.

We all searched for these items together as our day progressed.

On this particular day I saw needles in one camp, and no fecal matter in the at least 6 camps we cleaned up that day. We also served notice on several others. We parted company after the officer's duties were done, around 3:30pm.

I was surely expecting my observations of discrepancy in policy to be expressed to leadership of BPD by my liaison officer, and yet still had many more questions in my heart about the sequence of events between a citizen calling for a clean up, and the actual clean up.

As I reviewed my own notes, I had a much more burning question in my heart about this sequence of events, and inquired if I might attend clean ups once more.

On July 1st I was granted that opportunity.

We met in the morning as before, with all new officers, including my liaison officer who was

Sergeant Joseph Leighton.

This day was much like the previous, only wetter, and busier. I again found the officers behaving with a similar demeanor as before, (with, perhaps a couple off-color homeless related jokes, out of earshot from campers) and found them to be otherwise forthcoming.

These three officers, like the previous three, had not been informed of any policy changes.

Unlike before, this time, I was allowed to see the written orders that officers are given to conduct these clean ups. In each particular case, there is a specific set of orders to proceed. Each campsite has its own specific reason for clean up, and each camper has their own specific set of orders, as some of them are repeat campers in an area and known to the person/persons who are deciding whether the camp should be cleaned up. At this time I was still unclear who that person/persons really was.

I had presumed, as I stated, it was code enforcement officer Claudia Viscara, as she is the officer who types up the orders for security officers to follow.

Some of the reasons stated on these forms for clean up included;

- Belongings spilling onto thoroughfare,
- Bicycle chop shops
- Increased crime in area
- Clean up every encampment on an entire street \*( this, being in print, becomes absolute orders to an officer and people who have just arrived and set up camp were summarily moved along with a 15 minute warning and no prior contact. In some cases, a faceless voice from inside cardboard being told to move along).
- In some cases people were recommended to be trespassed from an entire block as they were repeat campers and seen as a problem. It was easy for me to note that none of these reasons seemed to be in compliance with stated policy.

We concluded the day with my heart sunk and tears in my eyes, and we went our separate ways, feeling good at least with our relationships with each other. While my heart sank with the compassionless removal of campers.

I observed two camps that day with needles and 4 sites with toilet paper with presumed fecal matter out of the many camps we cleaned up.

I never saw one single turd in two days of observations.

In review of what I had seen that day I decided I needed to contact our mayor of Bellingham, Seth Fleetwood.

On Monday, July 6th, I had a telephone appointment with Seth where I told him what I was observing. I suggested that we needed to reallocate funds from the clean up program by somewhere in the neighborhood of 50% and fund tent encampments to stabilize the population that we were currently compromising with this program.

He seemed genuinely concerned, and I suggested that he introduce an emergency agenda item in that night's Bellingham City Council meeting. He carefully measured his words and told me he was unsure he would be able to do that for me. I thanked him for his time, and got ready for public comment period at city council that evening.

That night at council, as predicted, Seth did not introduce an emergency agenda item. In fact the issue got no mention at all. The public comment period that night was comprised of various citizens, ALL of which were speaking specifically to this issue, including myself. After the public comment, when opportunity arose for councilors to speak of old and new business, they all remained silent on this issue.

The day after the city council meeting, July 7th, I drafted an email to almost all of our civic leaders and asked them to please engage the issue.

I later spoke at county council that evening alerting them to the problem as well, also without any council comment.

On Wednesday July 15th, after some back and forth with various civic leaders, a Zoom

meeting was arranged by Deputy Chief Flo Simon.

Present in that Zoom meeting was Deputy Chief Flo Simon, Lieutenant Crass, Sergeant Joe Leighton, Officer John Knutson, and enforcement officer Claudia Viscara, representing the Bellingham Police Department.

Representing the City of Bellingham was Bellingham Mayor Seth Fleetwood, and Bellingham City Councilors, Lisa Anderson Ward 5 and Michael Lilloquist Ward 6.

Also in attendance was Theresa Muirs from the Opportunity Council's Homeless Outreach Team, independent homeless advocate Shari Lapof, and myself.

In this meeting I finally got to ask the question, "Who determines which camps get cleaned up?". It was explained to us by Officer Viscara that the Bellingham Police Department receives the call, they in turn pass the information along to the HOT team.

The HOT team performs outreach per their policy and, it is claimed, even revisit the site once or twice more, before, then determining whether to advise enforcement officer Claudia Viscara whether to have the camp cleaned up, or whether it should stay in place.

In this meeting I also pointed out that absolutely none of the reasons given for camp clean ups in the written orders to the officers on the ground, were in compliance with the emergency policy as dictated by Chief Doll.

Theresa Muirs of the HOT team responded to this rather emotionally and raised her voice quite a bit.

The way she spit the word "chop shop" was quite venomous, and I had to remind her that chop shops are in no way, under the current stated policy, a valid reason for removal of camp. The group acquiesced to this.

Also, that belongings spilling out onto the roadway, is something our HOT team should be able to help our campers with.

Clearly Theresa defended herself to her actions, and, because this was a burning question in my heart for several weeks, I paid close attention to the fact that it was being claimed that Theresa was the sole arbiter of which camps would be recommended for removal, to enforcement officer Viscara, who, during this pandemic, is working remotely from home. I asked specifically if enforcement Officer Viscara had been going out to see any of these camps, and the answer was no.

As our meeting was drawing to a close, I summarized two key points I felt we all needed to observe and acknowledge;

- I was requesting that the officers in the field have a copy of the current emergency policy as dictated by Chief David Doll.
- Observing that there was no possible way to accurately judge the health of a camp without a qualified health professional present, there was no way for there to be compliance with Doll's stated policy. I also insisted that health professional be present at the time of the clean ups instead of making the observations up to three weeks before.

The group acquiesced to my two points and we parted company amicably. (a third point was officers should wear masks)

Monday, July 20th at Bellingham City Council, again, the entirety of the open comments section was on this issue and issues of homeless relief.

Again, the entire leadership of Bellingham was silent.

Friday the 24th, in our weekly scheduled meeting with Chief David Doll and Bellingham City Planner Rick Sepler, Homes Now Not Later was surprised with a couple of extra guests in our Zoom meeting. (I had been trying to keep my position with Homes Now as separated as I can from my role as Homeless Advocate for Whatcom County, but here we were)

In this meeting were Chief David Doll, Deputy Chief Flo Simon, City Councilor Hannah Stone, as well as myself and HomesNow chair Doug Gustafson.

In this meeting we followed up and detailed how we might move forward with the revelations

of the last meeting. A few concessions were made, including Chief Doll agreeing to the need for a qualified health professional to be present at the time of camp clean up to make the final determination whether the camp should be cleaned up , or remain, based on, ideally, health department recommendations and CDC recommendations.

Chief Doll furthermore said he would reach out to the health department to see if they might have available staff to help with this.

He also agreed to make sure a written version of the current emergency policy would be included in the text of the packet with camp clean up orders in it.

Furthermore, City Councilor Hannah Stone requested specific written materials to help her understand the issue more specifically. Homesnow asked for a copy of these as well.

These were:

- The BPD camp clean up policy
  - Any changes to the policy in light of the pandemic
  - Definitions of “sweep” vs “camp cleanup” and “public health and safety” concerns
  - An outline/flow chart of the camp clean up process and a record of camps that have been allowed to remain.

To date,(8-24-20) after reading this morning’s email from Councilor Hannah Stone , I can now report that absolutely none of these materials have made it to her desk, a month later.

After this meeting the clean ups, again stopped.

I was told the reason for this was because enforcement officer Claudia Viscara was on vacation.

I was told that the clean ups would not resume until August 10th, when she returned , and they certainly did not.

Myself and other citizen volunteers often go out onto the streets to render aid.

We bring garbage bags, water, toiletries, food, and advice on how to keep a camp clean.

If others are also doing outreach to these folks it has not been readily evident , creating an environment which , I think, is more likely to provoke a citizen demand for clean ups.

There have been sporadic camp clean ups throughout the month of August since enforcement Officer Viscarra’s return.

Also of note, in this morning’s email from councilor Hannah Stone , she wanted to clarify with me that representatives from the health department indicated it was their understanding that the BPD was following CDC guidelines.

She further states she has not received any confirmation of this from the BPD.

A call to Ann Deacon from the Whatcom county health department confirmed this and told me it was Chief Doll that gave this assurance.

As homeless advocate for Whatcom county, I call on all civic leaders to please pay attention to this EMERGENCY issue.

This of course is a lot to unpack and will be somewhat difficult to solve easily.

With that, I feel the need to remind you all that we are in the middle of a world pandemic emergency, Stage 2 in Whatcom county, with winter just around the corner, and literally hundreds of people living in our streets with absolutely no options.

I am calling for ;

- A 50% reduction in budget for camp clean ups
  - Emergency access to other municipal, county, state, and federal funds to be applied to a fund, administered by the Homeless Strategies Workgroup, or a like entity, to be directed toward emergency sheltering , mental health , and health services, with regard to the exact population impacted by camp clean ups.

In short, bring them in and welcome them back home.

This document serves as public record to the truth as I know it through the multitude of sources from which I have had to glean my information.

Please heed this call for leadership .

This failure to protect the least among us puts every one of us at risk during this very challenging time.

I am at your disposal , day or night , as we , together forge a positive outcome to our current plight.

With the greatest respect , and expectations ,

- Markis Dee Stidham ,Homeless Advocate for Whatcom County

[Sent from Yahoo Mail on Android](#)