

# Homeless swept from Polk Street alley despite lack of shelter beds

LAURA WAXMANN / CODY MCFARLAND / Dec. 4, 2019 4:40 p.m. / NEWS / THE CITY

On one of the first rainy days of the fall season, San Francisco police and officials on Wednesday cleared out a homeless encampment of more than two dozen people living off Polk Street.

And despite the bad weather, advocates and homeless residents said The City failed to offer enough shelter beds for those being displaced from the alley between Polk Street and Van Ness Avenue.

The longstanding encampment on Willow Street had grown to house more than 30 people in recent months, according to city officials, but homeless advocates who were present Wednesday said that only 11 shelter beds were offered.

Those who declined the beds were threatened with arrest, Willow Street campers and the advocates alleged. They also said that the encampment's residents were given little warning of the planned enforcement action.

Brian Edwards, an advocate with the Coalition on Homelessness who supported the Willow Street campers throughout the day, said city outreach workers offered a total of 10 traditional shelter beds where residents could stay for up to seven days.

He added that a single bed was offered at a navigation center, which is a type of homeless shelter where clients can stay for prolonged periods of time and may enter with their pets, partners and belongings.



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A homeless man cleans near his tent along Willow Street following a sweep operation in the alleyway near Polk Street. (Kevin N. Hume/S.F. Examiner)

Navigation center beds have been hailed as a more promising solution to resolving homelessness because they allow longer stays and are intended to place clients on a pathway to housing, as opposed to traditional shelters, where residents are often cycled back out onto the streets.

Andy Lynch, a spokesperson for the Mayor’s Office, contended that the Willow Street campers had ample time to prepare for the “encampment resolution.”

He said that the date on which the encampment was planned to be dismantled was “even pushed back from its originally scheduled date to allow Homeless Outreach Team and the Street Medicine Team more time to assess the needs of the people living there and try to find them appropriate resources.”

Lynch disputed the allegations that encampment residents who refused to leave were threatened with arrest, but said that they “could be issued a citation.”

Abigail Stewart-Kahn, a spokesperson for the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing, confirmed that between 30 and 40 people inhabited the alley in the weeks leading up to the encampment clearing. She said that

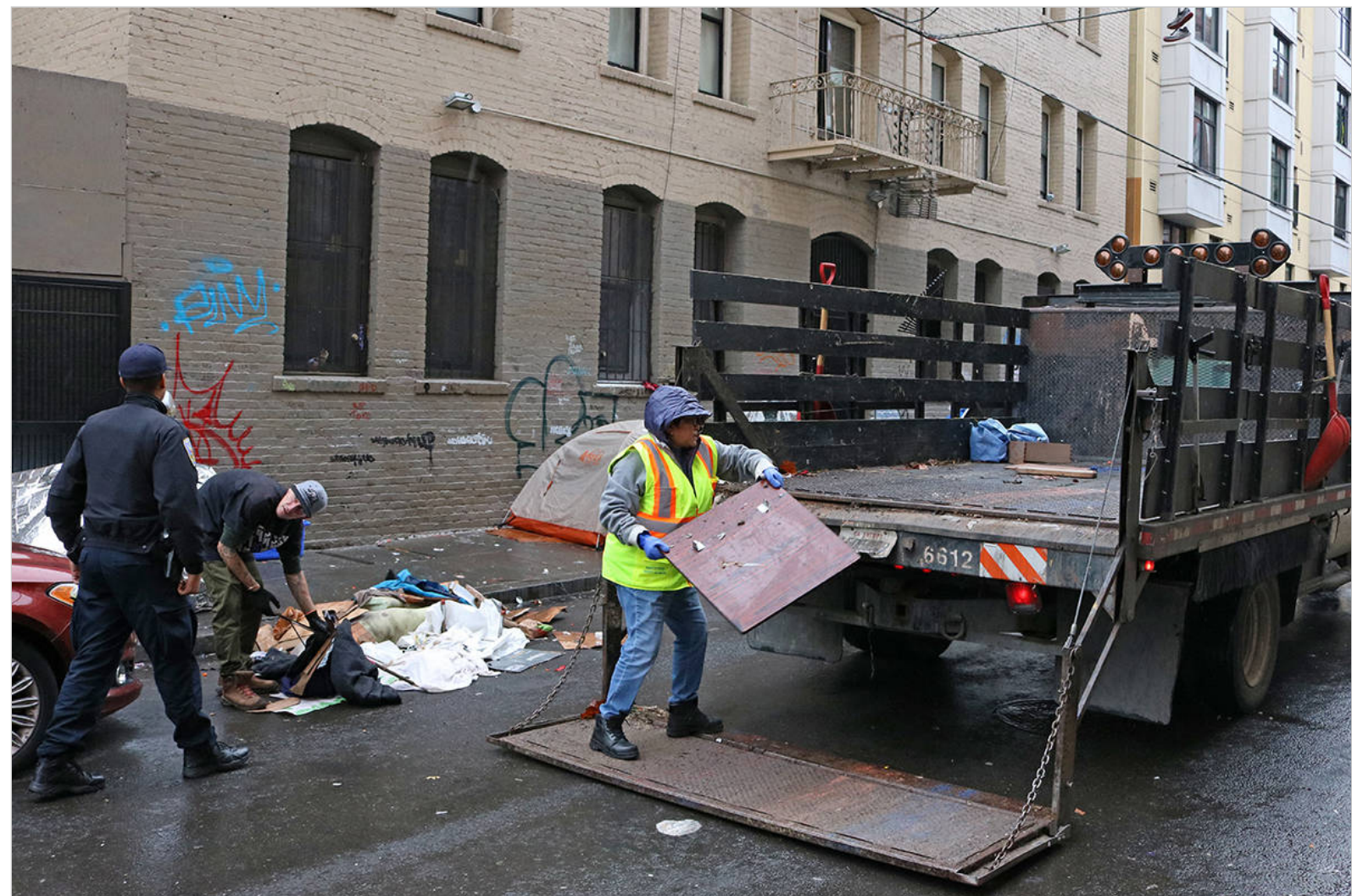


outreach workers have been engaging with them for a six-week period in an effort to connect them to services.

“They were offering navigation center beds when available, offering shelter beds, doing Coordinated Entry assessments. They were particularly working with those whose assessments identified them as ‘housing referral status,’ to work to get them into navigation centers and on the pathway to housing,” she said.

Neither Lynch nor Stewart-Kahn were able to immediately provide information on how many encampment residents had been placed in shelter or navigation center beds over the six-week period in which the outreach was conducted.

They also could not confirm the number of beds that were offered to campers on Wednesday.



Edwards called The City’s offerings “bullshit.”

“It’s a seven-day bed, which you will be booted out of after seven days. To accept it, you would have to give up your possessions because it’s not a navigation center,” he said.


Edwards said that navigation center beds are preferred by many homeless individuals because they are not required to abandon their belongings or pets to gain access, but added that The City is currently lacking capacity in these types of shelters.

“You don’t have to give [things] up to go to a navigation center — you can go with your partner, you can bring your pet and you can have some of your stuff,” said Kelley Cutler, a human rights advocate with the Coalition on Homelessness. “To get these beds that they’re offering for seven days, you have to give these things up. You can’t take your shelter. It just doesn’t make sense.”

The encampment stretched along two blocks of Willow Street, and Wednesday’s enforcement started on the block of Willow Street between Polk Street and Van Ness Avenue.


By Wednesday afternoon, that block was clear of tents, and police barricades had been set up to discourage the homeless from returning.

While The City described Wednesday’s encampment clearing as a “resolution” — a process that involves weeks of preparation by outreach workers — advocates described it as a “sweep,” because the enforcement would effectively displace the campers without resolving their homelessness.

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A homeless man works on a bicycle along Willow Street following a sweep operation in the alleyway near Polk Street. (Kevin N. Hume/S.F. Examiner)

The alley's homeless residents said Tuesday evening that they were unclear about the details of the clearing.

"They could come tomorrow, they could come tonight," said Jason Dearman, a San Francisco native who has been homeless for 25 years, and has camped on and off Willow Street for most of that time.

"The question I have is, clear us out to where? Where are they going to put us?" said Dearman.

He added that the Willow Street campers are "run out" of the alley by city officials "at least once a day."

He said that while some services are offered to the homeless, those who are not prioritized by The City for housing are only given temporary reprieve before being forced back onto the streets.

Under The City's newly implemented Coordinated Entry system, the homeless are prioritized according to the length of time they have been homeless, their physical well-being and other factors.

“Every homeless person should be a priority,” said Dearman. “The problem is there are so many of us. They don’t have enough beds for everybody here, so people make their own beds.”

But it is unclear if Dearman will be able to return to the alley he calls “home” after Wednesday.

“They said they are going to have an officer out here now so we can’t set up again. But that’s a lot of money for The City to pay,” said Dearman.

The encampment on Willow Street has been a source of growing contention for some business owners in the area, who said that while the homeless have set up in the alley for decades, drug use and violence have increased in recent years. However, the encampment’s removal was met with mixed emotions on Wednesday.

“It’s always been a little rough but it’s definitely gotten worse — I want to say things started to turn a bit two summers ago. What changed then was that I never really witnessed any open drug use until then,” said Andrea Boomer, who has operated Aspect Framing Studio at the corner of Willow and Polk streets for some four years.

While Boomer said that she welcomed The City responding to an increasingly dire and violent situation in the alley, she added that she doesn’t “think it works to just shuffle people around from place to place.”

“It’s an issue that needs to be tackled from a lot of different angles for it to really work,” said Boomer.





Department of Public Works employees set up barriers along the sidewalks after a homeless encampment sweep on Willow Street. (Cody McFarland/Special to S.F. Examiner)

Ruby Korger, a senior medical case manager with the San Francisco Community Health Center, said that her organization and other service providers located in a building adjacent to Willow Street have been conducting outreach to homeless people in the area since the 1980s.

“All of these sweeps have made everything more difficult — we can’t serve most of our clients easily. My job is 10,000 times harder because often I can’t find my clients,” said Korger.

“Every time they do a sweep, they do not save anyone’s stuff. They are throwing away medications.”

Korger added that the sweeps are also “increasing the rapes that occur because none of the people can sleep safely together.”

“They are all walking around on their own. People are increasing their meth use so they can walk around all night and not be attacked,” said Korger. “No one is getting any sleep. They are being bullied by the cops and there aren’t enough shelter beds to put them up in.”

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