

beds offered during sweep near Civic Center

Trisha Thadani

Dec. 5, 2019 | Updated: Dec. 5, 2019 12:48 p.m.



Bonnie Lukesh works to clean off her tent before packing it up with her other belongings during a sweep of homeless tents and encampments by the Department of Public Works and San Francisco Police along Willow Street in San Francisco, Calif. Wednesday, Dec. 4, 2019.

Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

San Francisco cleared a Civic Center alley of tents Wednesday, one of its largest homeless sweeps of the year, causing dozens of people to fold up their makeshift homes, throw out their belongings and scatter elsewhere.

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afternoon, a day before the sweep, as she dabbed her face with makeup inside her tent. Collier has lived on the street for five months, and said she would jump at any opportunity to move indoors.

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As San Francisco's homeless population skyrockets and the city's tolerance for large tent encampments dwindles, there is a constant shortage of resources for those in need. The shelter waiting lists often top 1,000 people, and the city's Navigation Centers — shelters with extra services — are filled every night.

On Wednesday morning, Bonnie Lukesh, 37, said she was roused by a policeman, who said she would have to leave soon. Right down the street was a San Francisco Public Works truck filled with barricades that they would erect once people left.



John Blanchard / The Chronicle

It was the first time she'd heard from an official that she would have to leave the alley, she said. As she wiped down her tarp, she said the Homeless Outreach Team was trying to figure out if there was a Navigation Center bed available.

"I've been trying to get back into a Navigation Center for the past four months," she said. She had been in one a few months prior, but had to leave when she hit her 90-day limit.

The Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing said there were two Navigation Center beds available Wednesday and "many throughout the six-week engagements." There were 40 or so people on the street who were told to move Wednesday morning.

Kelley Cutler, a member of the Coalition on Homelessness, assumes that those who didn't make it into a shelter just moved over to the next alley. She called it a bungled opportunity to help people off the streets.

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"It could have been an opportunity to connect with folks and connect them into resources," Cutler said. "But the problem is that we don't have the resources. ... People are just getting squeezed more and more."

Willow Street, an alley that runs between Franklin and Larkin Streets, has long been a magnet for homeless people and drug use. But ask nearly anyone on Willow Street, and they'll have a story about how living in that alley has saved their life — or someone else's.

One woman says she's revived several different people with Narcan at least 22 times, while a man who recently overdosed said his friends not only took care of him — but kept his wallet and keys so no one else would steal them. It's gestures like this, they say, that make this alley a community and place where they feel safe in San Francisco.

"We look out for each other here," said a 34-year-old man, who gave his name only as Melqui. "You

to keeping each other safe.

“It’s dangerous to do drugs alone,” said a woman who gave only her first name, Rebecca, as she prepared to shoot up Tuesday morning. “When you do heroin with a bit of Fentanyl, like I’m about to do, it’s good to have people you trust around.”

Some even referred to it as a quasi-safe injection site, where they know if they overdose, plenty of people with Narcan can help revive them.

Jeannie Little, executive director of The Center for Harm Reduction Therapy, worries that breaking up this encampment will cause people to scatter and use alone in doorways or quiet alleys. Solo drug use has become even more worrisome as drugs like Fentanyl — which is 100 times more potent than morphine — has surpassed heroin as the leading cause of opioid deaths in San Francisco.

The Harm Reduction Therapy center has set up a mobile unit outside Willow Street every Thursday, to offer people services like therapy and Narcan training for the past few months.

“The problem with the clearing or the sweeping, or whatever you want to call it, is that it disrupts relationships that actually keep people safer,” Little said. “And without a viable and safe option that protects people’s health, like a dry and warm place to sleep, it’s dangerous to break up these communities.”

Still, the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing says that “even at their best, encampments are inadequate and unhealthy places for people to live,” according to its 2016 Strategic Framework. They can create serious “public health and life safety hazards” for the people who live there and their neighbors. They can also often magnets for drug dealing and crime.

Since 2018, the city has increased its effort to dismantle large encampments. Some areas, like along Division Street and the Inner Mission, have seen big improvements. The number of large encampments went down from 17 in July 2018 to nine in October 2019, according to city data.

But that hasn’t stopped people from scattering into other neighborhoods, like the Castro, Hayes

that effort has been stymied by opposition from the federal government. In the meantime, she is also working on adding 1,000 more shelter beds to the city by the end of next year. The city is set to open a massive 200-bed Navigation Center on the Embarcadero by the end of this year.

But until the city increases its resources and creates more desirable places for the homeless to go, many on Willow Street said they had no other choice but to move elsewhere.

“We don’t want to be outside, but it’s either this or nothing,” said Collier. “If Willow gets shut down, then we’ll find another block. And soon enough, we’ll just go in front of City Hall.”

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