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FEATURED

County bans homeless people from sleeping or storing belongings on public property

By Stacy Moore Hi-Desert Star
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Volunteers from Oasis Community Church hand out Bibles and outerwear during an outreach to homeless individuals in the Twentynine Palms area before Thanksgiving 2024.

Courtesy photo



SAN BERNARDINO — Unhoused people will be forcibly moved and fined for camping on public property starting next month under rules passed by the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors Sept. 9.

County officials claim this prohibition will “humanely eliminate homeless encampments,” according to a press release issued by Board of Supervisors Chairman and 3rd District Supervisor Dawn Rowe.

“Passing this ordinance is an important step in our proactive approach to addressing homeless encampments,” Rowe said in a released statement.

“It also ensures that people experiencing homelessness have access to the appropriate supportive services.”

Several speakers who took the microphone before the supervisors’ vote last week said the ban would force people into jail without offering any real solutions to homelessness.

“There are people that are elderly that are left on the street. They don’t have anyplace to go,” Alyce Herrera, of Joshua Tree, said.

“There was a homeless person in Twentynine Palms who died in the park from exposure to cold. He froze to death lying there. He was elderly. If you want to help your most vulnerable constituents, I don’t see who else is more vulnerable than the homeless. Please, vote no.”

Joshua Tree resident Peggy Lee Kennedy reminded the board of supervisors that 62.5% of unhoused county residents reported having no income in the latest point-in-time census.

“Making it illegal for them to sleep outside is inhumane. We should be doing things to find solutions, real solutions,” she said.

Rayeesha Belvins with the Time For Change Foundation said she was speaking from experience of living without a home in San Bernardino County.

“Being homeless is not easy. It puts us at a survival mindset,” she said.

“I’m asking if you guys could vote ‘no’ to help others like myself have a second chance at being housed instead of being thrown out as trash.”

“What about the unhoused mother and her children?” asked Ipyani Lockert with the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity.

“They get that first ticket. Then they get that second ticket. Now they’ve got a warrant. Now, a mother is being incarcerated for being unhoused. Children are sent to a foster care system that often continues to perpetuate the harms that our community is always trying to grow from,” Lockert said.

The final speaker also warned about the incarceration of adults and children.

“You guys are saying that you’re for the people but then you turn around and stab the people in the back doing something like this,” said the man, identified as Les.

“Once the mother gets locked up, the jail system is about to make money. Then CFS, they’re about to make money off the little child. Taxpayers have to pay that. The sad thing about all this — we talk about murderers, we talk about killers, well we’re helping them become killers and murderers because we’re putting them in a system that allows them to get raped,” he said.

He pointed out the county is being sued over reports of sexual abuse of children in its two juvenile detention centers.

Rowe: Camp conditions a threat to public safety

Rowe, who chairs the board of supervisors and represents the 3rd District, which includes the Morongo Basin, joined her fellow supervisors in unanimously approving the ordinance.

“The number of encampments on county public property has increased over recent years,” Rowe said in a statement released by the county.

“These conditions threaten not only those living within the encampments, but also the broader community. The goal of this ordinance is to address critical health and safety risks, while also ensuring that people experiencing homelessness have access to the care and support they need.”

The new rules will take effect Oct. 9. It will affect people in unincorporated county areas like Joshua Tree, Morongo Valley, Desert Heights, Landers and Wonder Valley.

“The county will humanely remove encampments from county public property through a coordinated, multi-agency response that connects individuals to housing and supportive services,” county spokesperson Ashley Jones said in response to questions from The Desert Trail.

“The county has consistently conducted homeless outreach events to engage individuals, and these efforts will continue prior to any encampment clearing,” Jones said.

“Individuals impacted by encampment clearings will be immediately connected to low-barrier shelters and other housing options.”

Fines for violations

start at \$100

The ordinance states the following.

- Occupying any temporary structure, laying down bedding or a tent or living in a vehicle are all banned on any public property not designated as campgrounds.
- No one may sit, lie down or store personal property on any street, sidewalk, alley, trail or highway.
- Code enforcement officers may immediately remove personal property that is being used or stored on a street, sidewalk, alley, trail, highway, entrance to public facilities or other public right of way.
- The county may remove a camp with personal property after providing written notice. However, if an officer determines the camp poses “an imminent and substantial threat to public health or safety,” they may immediately remove it.
- Unless there is an immediate threat to public health or safety, the county will “to the extent possible,” provide homeless outreach services to affected individuals. The ordinance states it is not mandatory to offer services.
- Personal property taken that does not constitute a health or safety hazard must be stored for at least 90 days.
- Anyone violating the ban on sitting or sleeping on public right of ways or camping on public property will be found guilty of an infraction or a misdemeanor.
- If the person is convicted or pleads no contest, they will be fined up to \$100 for a first violation, \$200 for a second violation within a year and \$500 for each additional violation within a year. The court may impose other costs.

- “As an alternative to a fine, the county would encourage the court to grant diversion or probation with a condition the offender complete a rehabilitation program or treatment plan.”

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